Karad’Thul

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Humble home

The warm scent of pipe smoke curled around my head, mixing with the crisp mountain air as I sat on my porch, watching the village go about its daily life. The sun hung high over the valley, casting long golden rays across the fields of wheat that swayed in the breeze. Beyond the fields, rows of fruit gardens thrived—apple trees heavy with their yield, sturdy berry bushes waiting to be picked. A few goats and pigs wandered lazily through the open pathways between stone cottages, their owners not too worried about keeping them fenced in. Dwarves lived with the land, not against it.

I took a slow draw from my pipe, letting the familiar, rich taste of my homegrown hemp settle in my lungs before exhaling a steady plume of smoke. It danced in the air before drifting away over my garden—rows of herbs, vegetables, and, of course, my private stash of pipeweed. Some dwarves enjoyed a fine ale; I found my peace in a good smoke.

From my porch, I could see the heart of the village—a modest but well-built place of stone and timber. Blacksmiths hammered away in their forges, sending ringing notes of steel into the air. A few merchants had set up small stalls to sell crafted goods, everything from carved trinkets to iron tools. Dwarven children, stout and stubborn as their parents, chased each other through the narrow streets, kicking up dust and laughter.

This was home. The same home I had lived in for years, right at the foot of the high mountains. A small village, but a strong one.

I stroked my beard, my fingers combing through the thick white strands as I mulled over a thought that had been sitting in my mind for some time now—I needed more space. My cottage was built for living, but not for crafting. Over the years, my work had expanded. I had tools for smithing, for carving, for crafting, for repairs. Equipment I had gathered from my past, from jobs and favors, from old work I had done for others. Right now, they were crammed into whatever corner I could find inside my home, piled up like forgotten treasure in a dragon’s hoard. It wasn’t right.

I needed a workspace. A proper extension to my home—a room where I could set everything in order, where I could work in peace without knocking over a crate of nails every time I needed my hammer. It was time to build.

The problem was, as always, time and effort. I could do it myself, of course. A lifetime of work had left me skilled in stone, timber, and metal. But it wasn’t the work itself that made me hesitate—it was the weight of everything else. Every time I got the chance to do something for myself, something would come up. A neighbor needed help fixing a roof. A merchant wanted an iron brace reforged. A farmer needed a tool mended. The village had its demands, and being a Grandmaster meant people came to me first when they needed something done.

Still, the idea of that workshop stayed with me as I smoked, watching the people of the village move about their day.

I tapped my pipe against the wooden railing, knocking the ashes loose, and stretched my legs. Maybe I'd start tomorrow. Maybe I'd go into town and see if there was good nails to be had. Or maybe, just maybe, something would come along to pull me away once again.

Life had a habit of doing that.

The morning air was crisp, carrying the scent of damp earth and fresh mountain breeze as I stepped out of my cottage. The sky had barely begun to brighten, the first hints of sunlight creeping over the jagged peaks in the distance. I stretched my arms wide, rolling the stiffness from my shoulders.

Today, I would build.

I grabbed my axe and saw from where they rested by the porch, their wooden handles smooth and familiar in my grip. A good tool, like a good weapon, needed to be treated well, and these had served me faithfully for years. My belt was fastened tight, and my boots thudded against the dirt path as I made my way toward the woods that stood beyond the wheat fields.

The forest welcomed me with a hush, the towering trees swaying gently, leaves rustling in greeting. I had worked with wood all my life—mined the stone, forged the iron, but it was the timber that always felt the most alive. It had a scent that carried memories, that told stories if you listened well enough.

I set my axe to the first tree, a tall, sturdy pine, its bark rough under my calloused fingers. With a practiced stance, I swung. The steel bit deep into the trunk, sending a clean, sharp crack through the stillness. Another swing, and another. My arms moved in a rhythm, steady, relentless, until the wood groaned, bent, and with a great final creak, the tree toppled to the earth, shaking the ground as it fell.

I wiped my brow and moved to the next.

For an hour, I worked—chopping, felling, clearing. Each tree that came down, I stripped of its branches, piling them neatly to the side. The trunks were smooth, solid, and thick—perfect for what I needed.

When I had gathered enough, I let out a sharp whistle. Not long after, a familiar snort and the clinking of harness buckles reached my ears. My horse, a broad-shouldered beast named Stonehoof, trotted through the trees, his dark coat glistening in the early light. He was built strong, like a proper dwarven workhorse should be.

"Come on, lad," I said, giving his flank a firm pat. "Got some hauling to do."

With practiced ease, I tied the logs together with thick rope and hitched them to Stonehoof's harness. The beast huffed, flexed his muscles, and began to pull. The logs slid through the dirt, leaving tracks in the soft earth as we made our way back toward the village.

The sawmill sat near the river that ran through the settlement, its wooden frame sturdy and well-worn by years of use. Old Thrain, the mill master, was already at work, his beard stained with sawdust, his arms thick from a lifetime of labor. He gave me a knowing nod as I approached.

"Building something, are ye?" he grunted, eyeing my haul.

"Aye," I said, sliding a log into position. "Need a workspace. Time I had a place to put my tools instead of tripping over them."

Thrain chuckled and set to work. His sawmill was a simple but effective setup—large sawblades, powered by the force of the river, cut through the logs with steady precision. I helped where needed, moving the heavy wood into place, guiding the planks as they were sliced to size.

Within a few hours, my timber had been transformed. Dozens of planks, smooth and ready, stacked neatly onto my cart. I hitched Stonehoof to it once more and guided him back to my home, the fresh scent of cut wood filling the air.

By the time I reached my cottage, the sun had climbed high, but there was still plenty of work to do. I set the planks down beside my house, wiped the sweat from my brow, and went inside.

From my toolshelf, I grabbed my hammer, nails, and a measuring stick. This part, at least, was familiar. I had built before. I had raised halls and bridges, reforged fortresses, crafted homes and towers. But this—this was for me.

I measured the space beside my cottage, marking the ground with careful precision. The foundation was already strong—I had built well in my younger years—but I needed to extend it outward.

With my hammer in hand, I began.

The walls came first. One by one, I lifted the sturdy planks, nailing them into place, making sure each one sat firm and true. I set the beams at the corners, driving them deep into the ground before securing them with thick iron brackets. My arms burned with effort, but I relished the work, the satisfying weight of each strike, the rhythmic pounding of iron against wood.

As the structure took shape, I moved to the rafters. Thick beams were set overhead, nailed into position to brace the roof that would come next. The sun cast long shadows through the wooden frame, but I could already see it—this space would be mine, my workshop, my sanctuary.

The sound of my hammer rang out through the village, steady and strong. Some villagers passed by, offering nods of approval. A few dwarflings stopped to watch, eyes wide with curiosity.

By the time evening threatened the sky, the framework stood tall, the bones of a new room rising beside my home. There was still much to do—roofing, flooring, doors—but I could already feel it becoming real.

I took a step back, wiped the sawdust from my beard, and let out a satisfied grunt.

Tomorrow, I'd finish it. But for now, I'd earned a good meal and a fine smoke.

The week passed in a steady rhythm of work. Each morning, I rose with the sun, stretched out my weary muscles, and set to the task of building my workshop.

The walls came together first—each plank fitted snugly against the next, nailed into place with firm, unyielding strokes. The roofing was harder, requiring careful placement of support beams before layering the wooden shingles, ensuring they interlocked tightly. I wasn't about to let a single drop of rain slip through—not in my workshop.

The door was a fine thing. Solid oak, thick and sturdy, crafted with my own hands and attached with iron hinges that groaned as they settled into place. It connected to my house seamlessly, as if it had always belonged there. The workshop was nearly complete.

But a room was just a hollow shell until it had purpose.

With some of the leftover wood, I set about crafting a proper table—broad, thick, able to withstand the pounding of hammers and the weight of anvils and tools. It took two days of measured work, smoothing the surface, ensuring the legs were sturdy, carving the edges with simple but elegant dwarven patterns. I made shelves next, cutting, sanding, and setting them into the walls, reinforced with thick iron brackets. These would hold my supplies—oils, sharpening stones, carving knives, and whatever else I needed within easy reach.

The final touches were small but satisfying. I hammered thick nails into the walls, hanging my tools with careful precision. Every hammer, chisel, and saw had its place. Order. A proper workshop deserved order.

By the time I stepped back to admire my work, my new extension was no longer just a space—it was a proper forge and crafting room. A place where things would be built, repaired, and reforged.

And speaking of repairs—there was no time to waste.

I set down my hammer, wiped the sweat from my brow, and retrieved a bundle of old tools that had seen better days. Some of them had been gifts, others relics of past work, all of them worn but still worthy.

The handles of hammers and axes needed replacing first. I carved each new handle with care, shaping the wood to fit my grip, sanding them smooth before fitting them onto the heads with iron wedges. It was slow work—work that required patience—but by the end of the day, I had reforged old tools into new strength.

Then came the sharpening.

I set my whetstone, dipped it in oil, and began the slow, methodical grinding of steel against stone. Sparks danced in the dim light as I restored each blade to its former glory. The rhythmic scrape of metal against the stone was almost soothing. One by one, the edges gleamed once more, ready for work.

By the time I set the last tool onto the shelf, the workshop was truly mine.

The sun was beginning to dip below the peaks when I decided I had worked enough. A man could only go so long before his stomach made demands that could not be ignored.

I strode into my cellar, a cool, stone-walled room beneath my cottage, well-stocked with provisions. There, hanging from thick hooks, were cured meats, salted and smoked, waiting for the right occasion. I grabbed a good cut, thick and marbled, and then reached for a sack of potatoes.

Stepping outside, I picked a few fresh vegetables from my garden—onions, carrots, a handful of fragrant herbs. No meal was worth eating without something green to go with it.

Back inside, I set to work at the hearth, lighting the fire beneath my iron pot. The scent of sizzling meat filled the air as I browned the cuts, letting the fat render down into something rich and golden. The potatoes went in next, diced and tossed into the pot along with water, herbs, and a pinch of salt. It wasn't fancy, but it was good, hearty food—a proper dwarven meal.

As the stew simmered, I went back to the cellar once more and retrieved a keg of ale. Cold and deep brown, aged well over the seasons, the kind of brew that warmed the bones and soothed the soul.

By the time I finally sat at my table, the stew was thick, steaming, and rich with the scent of roasted meat and herbs. I tore a chunk of fresh bread from a loaf and dipped it in, savoring the first bite. It filled my belly in a way only a hard day’s labor could make a meal feel earned.

The ale was crisp and smooth, washing everything down with a deep, malty finish. I sighed contentedly.

This was life. Simple, honest, and good.

After cleaning my plate and stacking my mug alongside the empty bowl, I stepped out onto the porch once more.

The village had begun to settle for the night. The torches lining the streets burned soft and warm. The distant glow of forges still flickered, but the hammering had slowed. Somewhere in the distance, I heard the low tune of a flute being played, a lazy melody drifting through the mountain air.

I took my pipe from my pocket, packed it with fresh hemp from my garden, and struck a match. The flame flared, then dimmed as I took the first draw, letting the rich, earthy smoke curl around my beard.

I leaned back, exhaling slowly, watching the stars begin to glimmer over the mountains.

My workshop was built. The tools were set.

The morning sun stretched long over the valley as I stepped into the field, my boots sinking into the cool, damp soil. Today was a day for planting.

I had done many things in my life—built fortresses, carved stone, forged steel—but the land had its own kind of work, and it had its own rewards. The earth was honest. What you gave, it returned, if you treated it right.

Stonehoof stood ready, harness strapped snugly around his muscular frame. He was no warhorse, but he had the strength of ten men when it came to pulling a plow through the stubborn soil. I patted his flank and took the reins.

"Let’s get to it, lad," I murmured.

With a firm grip, I drove the plow deep into the earth, and with a snort, Stonehoof began his slow, steady march forward. The blade cut through the soil, turning it over in thick, rich clumps. The scent of fresh earth filled the air, and behind me, the dark furrows stretched in neat rows, ready for sowing.

The work was hard and steady. Each step forward was a battle against the weight of the plow, against the stubborn pull of the land. Sweat dripped from my brow, dampening my beard, but I worked through it, pushing on.

Before long, a few villagers had come to help with the sowing. Their hands scattered the seeds, walking behind me in rhythm with the plow.

The work went hand in hand—some digging, some sowing, others covering the fresh seeds with light layers of earth. The sound of laughter and voices filled the fields, breaking the quiet of the morning. This was the way of things. One man alone could do much, but many hands made for an easier day.

The sun climbed high as we worked. Time stretched in the steady, familiar rhythm of labor. Hours passed, and by midday, the wheat was sown.

I wiped my brow, stretching my arms with a grunt. "Good work," I called to the others. "We’ll have a fine harvest if the weather holds."

They nodded in agreement, some resting on their shovels, others already turning to head home for the evening meal.

But the peace would not last.

I was leading Stonehoof back toward the stables when the alarm rang out—short, sharp cries from the village. My ears perked, muscles tensing.

Then I heard the panicked bleating of a sheep, followed by the deep-throated growl of a predator.

I turned quickly, just in time to see a blur of gray fur streaking away from one of the livestock pens. The wolf had struck fast, its fangs already stained with blood, but the carcass it had left behind lay untouched.

That was bad news.

A wolf that killed for food could be dealt with, but one that killed for sport—that was a danger that would return.

I exhaled through my nose, my mind made up.

I went inside, grabbed my hunting bow, my quiver full of broadhead arrows, and slung them over my shoulder. Then, without a word, I set out to track the beast.

The wolf's trail was easy enough to find. A streak of crimson through the dirt, heavy pawprints leading away toward the thick brush that bordered the village. The sun was sinking fast, painting the land in deep oranges and long, stretching shadows.

I moved quietly, eyes scanning for any sign of movement. The forest grew thick, branches clawing at the darkening sky, the air alive with the sounds of the wild. I kept my footsteps light, tracking the wolf's path through the underbrush.

An hour passed.

Then—movement. A flicker of gray fur between the trees.

I drew my bow, breath steady. The wolf was ahead, its body tense, ears flicking. It had caught my scent.

Then it bolted.

The chase was on.

I ran, my boots thudding against the forest floor, ducking beneath branches, leaping over fallen logs. The wolf was fast, but I was relentless. I had hunted before plenty, tracked creatures through the mountains and through the deep forests.

The wolf turned sharply, disappearing into the brush. I slowed, scanning the shadows.

Then I saw it again—its eyes glinting in the darkness.

It was watching me. It knew I was there, knew that I was hunting it. But it had made a mistake.

It had stopped.

I raised my bow, fingers tightening around the string.

A deep breath. A still mind. A steady hand.

The arrow flew.

It struck true, piercing the wolf's side with a dull thud. The creature let out a short, sharp yelp, staggering before collapsing onto the forest floor.

I approached carefully, my knife in hand. One clean stroke to ensure the beast did not suffer.

Then, silence.

The hunt was over.

I took out my hunting knife and set to work.

I skinned the wolf with care, peeling the fur away in clean, steady cuts. A good hide, thick and warm. It would make fine leather for clothing or armor, but for me—I had another use in mind.

By the time I was finished, the fur was rolled neatly over my shoulder, and I made my way back to the village under the light of the rising moon.

Back home, I spread the hide out on a clean wooden frame, preparing it for drying. The process would take time—scraping away the flesh, stretching it tight, treating it with salts and oils.

But in the end, it would make a fine, cozy rug—something to lay before the hearth, a small trophy of the night's work.

Satisfied, I cleaned my blade, set it aside, and returned to my porch.

I packed my pipe once more, struck a match, and watched as the smoke curled into the night sky.

The village was quiet again. The sheep were safe.

Tomorrow would bring more work, more tasks, more life.

But tonight, the fire burned warm, and the wolf lay dead.

Karad'Thul

High in the mountain's embrace, carved from the very bones of the earth, stood the great dwarven city of Karad'Thul—a stronghold of stone and steel, a beacon of dwarven craftsmanship and resilience.

Its high towers rose from the mountain slopes like unyielding sentinels, their walls sculpted with intricate carvings depicting ancient battles, legendary kings, and the unbroken spirit of the dwarven people. The city was a sight to behold, a testament to centuries of labor, its foundations rooted in the bedrock, its spires reaching for the sky.

At the very heart of Karad'Thul, standing like the crown upon a warrior's brow, was Durand'Zar, the Hard Keep, where King Thrain Stonehelm and Queen Veldra Silverheart ruled with wisdom and strength. The castle's walls were thick and unyielding, carved from the very mountain itself, adorned with gold-inlaid murals and obsidian spires that gleamed under the morning sun.

A city of dwarves was a city of industry, and Karad'Thul was no exception. Smoke billowed from countless forges, their chimneys breathing out the heat of burning coals, the sounds of hammers striking anvils ringing like a song of steel across the streets.

The Market District was always bustling—vendors shouting over one another, pushing carts of goods, selling everything from precious gems to battle-ready axes, from freshly baked barley bread to exotic spices brought in by surface traders.

The city was divided into districts, each serving a purpose:

The Noble Quarter, where lords, ladies, and the wealthy merchant clans lived in ornate stone halls adorned with precious metals and stained glass windows that told the history of Karad'Thul.

The Slag District, home to the working class, the miners, the blacksmiths, the artisans, where sweat and toil were as common as stone and steel.

The Guild Quarter, where guild halls rose in proud defiance against the sky, each marked with the sigil of its trade. Masons, miners, weavers, farmers, stonemasons, warriors—all had a place here.

The Courts of Justice, where the High Council debated laws, settled disputes, and saw to the kingdom's governance.

The Grand Reservoirs, where the purest waters from mountain springs flowed through arched aqueducts and stone-carved channels, providing fresh water to every corner of the city.

Karad'Thul was protected by high walls, their gates of iron and granite standing firm against any who might think to breach them. Towers lined the perimeter, where dwarven sentries stood watch, eyes ever-vigilant for threats from without and within.

Beyond the city, the mountain slopes and valleys were rich with wheat fields, orchards heavy with fruit, and grazing lands for goats and cattle. The dwarves of Karad'Thul were not just warriors and smiths; they were builders, farmers, and keepers of the land.

The sun had barely begun to rise when a knock sounded on my door.

I grumbled, rolling from my bed, stretching out my sore muscles. Another day, another task.

When I swung open the door, I found Master Ordrek Ironhand standing on my porch. A fellow guild member, Ordrek was a thick-browed, barrel-chested dwarf with a beard as wild as the mountains themselves.

"Morning, Grandmaster Gimil," he greeted, his voice rough like gravel grinding under boots.

I grunted in response, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. "What's the job?"

"City's called for you," Ordrek said, shifting his weight. "One of the great bridges in Karad'Thul took some damage in last week's storm. The Guild Council wants you in to help with repairs—and there's a few other things that need your expertise."

I scratched my beard. A damaged bridge was no small task, especially in a city built atop the spine of a mountain. Dwarves relied on their bridges as much as their axes. If one was failing, it needed fixing.

"Alright," I said, stepping back inside. "Give me a few minutes to get ready."

Ordrek nodded, adjusting his belt. "Be quick. The council's expecting you by midday."

As the door shut behind me, I sighed and rolled my shoulders. The city called, and duty answered.

I grabbed my toolbelt, my hammer, my work gloves, and packed a small bundle of supplies. It was time to return to Karad'Thul.

The morning air was crisp as I set off toward Karad'Thul, my boots pressing into the well-worn stone path that wound its way up toward the city. The mountains stretched high above, their peaks kissed by wisps of cloud, while below, the valleys rolled out like a green sea, dotted with farmland and orchards. The dirt road was firm beneath my feet, cut through with wagon tracks and hoof prints from those who had passed before me.

The journey to Karad'Thul was no short walk, but one I had made many times before. Along the way, mountain springs gushed from the rocky cliffs, feeding small streams that ran alongside the road, their waters clear and cold. Birds wheeled overhead, their cries echoing off the mountainside, and now and then, a goatherd guided his flock along the lower slopes, their bells jingling softly in the distance.

As I neared the city, the first great stone bridges came into view—masterworks of dwarven engineering, spanning across deep chasms, their arches carved with intricate reliefs of kings, warriors, and the gods of old.

Finally, the gates of Karad'Thul loomed before me.

I made my way to the Guild Quarter, where the Council of Guilds held its meetings. The Guild Hall was a grand building, carved deep into the rock, its high archways lined with carvings of smiths, masons, and artisans at work. The heavy oak doors swung open to reveal a long chamber, where members of the different guilds gathered at a massive stone table, their voices carrying through the hall.

As I stepped inside, Guildmaster Borik Stonewright, an elder mason with arms thick as tree trunks, beckoned me over.

"Gimil," Borik said, nodding in greeting. "You've heard of the bridge damage?"

"Aye," I replied, folding my arms. "What are we looking at?"

Guildmaster Ordrek, the same dwarf who had summoned me that morning, unrolled a large parchment map of the city, pointing to a bridge that spanned one of the deep ravines near the Market District.

"The last storm knocked loose some of the support stones, and a section of the bridge lost part of its decorative relief. It’s still standing, but it won’t hold long without reinforcement," Ordrek explained.

I pulled out a sheet of parchment and my charcoal stick, carefully sketching out a precise rendering of the bridge. Every measurement, every crack, every missing piece—everything had to be exact.

"We’ll need to re-anchor the loose stones," I murmured as I worked, "replace the ones that fell, and reinforce the weaker sections with mortar. And this—" I pointed to the **ornamental pillar at the bridge’s side, now missing its stonework relief—"**we’ll have to carve anew. Can’t leave it unfinished."

Borik grunted approvingly. "Good eye. Think you can carve a replacement?"

I smiled. "I’d be ashamed to call myself a mason if I couldn’t."

With that, I set to work.

In the stonecarver’s workshop, I selected a fine slab of granite—strong, weathered, but without fractures. A solid piece that would last for generations.

I laid it on the carving bench, picked up my chisel and hammer, and got to work.

Carving stone is an art of patience and precision.

Each stroke of the hammer sent flakes of stone cascading onto the floor, revealing the shape hidden within the rock. I worked methodically, shaping a simple relief of a dwarven warrior, much like the one that had once adorned the bridge’s post. The deep lines of his beard, the ridges of his armor, the stern gaze of a defender of the city—all had to be just right.

The hours passed as I chipped away, refining the details, smoothing the edges. The sound of hammer on stone filled the workshop, a familiar, rhythmic melody.

Four hours later, I stepped back, brushing the stone dust from my beard. The carving was finished—a proud warrior, hammer raised, standing eternal.

I nodded, satisfied. It would do.

With the help of a few strong hands, the stone relief was loaded onto a cart, and we set out toward the bridge.

The bridge loomed before us as we arrived, its great stone arch stretching over the deep ravine, the river far below rushing like a silver serpent.

The damage was clear. Several stones had fallen from the archway, leaving gaps in the bridge's support structure. Others were loose, held in place only by sheer weight. If left alone, time would crumble them away.

"Alright, lads," I called to the masons gathered, cracking my knuckles. "Let's get to work."

We hauled up blocks of fresh stone from the carts, measuring them carefully against the gaps in the bridge. Using chisels and hammers, we began shaping each block to fit seamlessly.

A poorly cut stone would mean weakness in the structure—a true mason didn't just fill gaps, he rebuilt strength.

One by one, we hoisted the new blocks into place. Some had to be lifted by pulleys, guided carefully into the bridge's arch. With each stone secured, the structure grew stronger.

With the stones set, we mixed a thick mortar of lime and sand, carefully sealing each joint, ensuring that no rain or wind could wear it down too quickly.

The bridge was breathing again, its bones restored.

Finally, it was time for the warrior relief.

We hoisted it into position at the bridge post, aligning it with the old grooves where the last piece had once sat. A few strong taps of the hammer, a final check for alignment—and it was home.

I took a step back, wiping sweat from my brow.

The bridge stood strong once more, its stones secure, its warrior watching over the city once again.

Borik clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Fine work, Grandmaster Gimil. The bridge will hold for another hundred years thanks to you."

I grinned, rolling my shoulders. "Just doing what needs doing."

As the sun began to sink toward the horizon, the last of the tools were packed up, and the masons departed, their work done.

I took one last look at the bridge, feeling the familiar satisfaction of a job well done.

But as always, a mason's work is never truly finished.

With the bridge repairs done and the city's archways standing strong once more, I figured I'd earned myself a proper drink. And there was no better place in Karad'Thul for that than the Snoring Bear Tavern.

The tavern sat at the edge of the Market District, where merchants, miners, and smiths alike gathered after a long day's work. Its stout stone walls were blackened by years of hearth smoke, and a great wooden bear carving loomed above the entrance, its maw open in a

permanent yawn—hence the name. The warm glow of lanterns and torches flickered from within, and as I stepped through the heavy doors, the scent of roasting meat, ale, and pipe smoke wrapped around me like an old friend.

Inside, the place was alive.

At the long wooden tables, dwarves feasted on roasted meats, thick stews, and warm loaves of barley bread, their tankards clanking together in toasts and their deep, hearty voices filling the air with conversation and laughter.

In the far corner, a small group of younger dwarves danced to the sound of a lively tune played on a flute and drum. They stomped their boots against the stone floor in rhythm, their beards swaying as they spun and clapped, singing along to a song that had likely been passed down through generations.

The bartender, Um, was a broad-shouldered, ruddy-cheeked fellow with a thick mustache that nearly covered his mouth. He worked tirelessly behind the counter, filling tankards from the great oak barrels stacked behind him. Now and then, he'd pour himself a drink as well, his hazy eyes betraying just how many he'd already had.

I found an empty seat near the hearth and settled in, the warmth of the fire seeping into my bones.

Um waddled over, wiping his hands on his apron. "What'll it be, Gimil?"

I set a few coins on the table. "A tankard of Mellow Tar and a proper meal—steak with potatoes."

Um grinned. "Aye, a good choice."

Moments later, a foaming tankard was set before me. I took a deep swig, the dark, thick ale sliding down smooth, warming my belly with its potent strength. Mellow Tar had a hint of smoky caramel, with a bite at the end—a proper drink for a hard day's work.

Soon, my plate arrived—a thick-cut steak, charred and dripping with herb-infused butter, with crispy, golden potatoes on the side. The first bite was tender, rich, and heavy with seasoning, just the way dwarves liked it.

For a while, I simply ate, drank, and listened to the tavern's melody.

The music picked up, and more dwarves joined the dancing. Some pounded their fists on the tables in rhythm, others raised their voices in song. A few clapped each other on the backs, toasting to their latest successes—a miner who struck a fine ore vein, a blacksmith who forged a sword fit for a king, a merchant who sold his wares for a tidy profit.

This was what I liked best about Karad'Thul—no matter a dwarf's station in life, when the day's work was done, the ale and the songs belonged to all.

I was halfway through my steak and third tankard when a familiar voice interrupted my peace.

"Grandmaster Gimil, mind if I sit?"

I looked up to see Dulrik Blackfist, a fellow guild member, standing by the table. He was younger than me, broad-shouldered and sharp-eyed, his beard braided tight in warrior's fashion. He carried himself with the air of a man always looking for the next job.

I gestured to the seat across from me. "Go on, then. What brings you here?"

Dulrik leaned in slightly, lowering his voice just enough to be heard over the noise of the tavern. "Word is, the Warrior's Guild is short on mercenaries. More work than hands to do it. There's good coin in it—they need escorts for trade caravans, guards for noble houses, even some deeper work into the mountain roads. Figured I'd see if you were interested."

I chewed on the thought along with my steak.

I'd spent twenty years fighting in my younger days, before I'd taken up the hammer and chisel full-time. I still knew my way around a blade, a hammer, and a shield. I had the scars to prove it.

"Good coin, you say?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Aye," Dulrik nodded. "And you'd be in demand. Everyone knows your name, Gimil. You're a Grandmaster, and an experienced fighter to boot. They'd value you."

That part made me grin. I wasn't above needing the money—I was short on coin as it was.

"Appreciate the offer," I said, lifting my tankard in a toast. "If I find myself needing work, I'll look into it."

Dulrik grinned. "That's all I needed to hear."

He called for another round, and we drank deep.

The tavern's energy only grew stronger as the night deepened. The music swelled, the dancing quickened, and the songs rang loud and clear.

More dwarves stamped their boots, clapped their hands, and raised their voices in drinking songs. Tankards slammed on tables, ale sloshed, and old friends threw arms around each other's shoulders, singing in drunken camaraderie.

Behind the bar, Um was red-faced and hazy-eyed, pouring drinks with both hands. Every third pour, he filled a tankard for himself, gulping it down without breaking stride.

I chuckled into my ale. It was a fine night in Karad'Thul.

As I leaned back in my chair, pipe in hand, I pondered the offer Dulrik had given me.

Did I want to return to the warrior's life? The pay was good, the work steady, but it was a path that led to blood, danger, and battle.

Still, coin was coin, and a Grandmaster's skill should never go to waste.

I puffed on my pipe, letting the thoughts settle.

Tomorrow, I'd decide. But tonight, I drank.

The ale was sitting warm in my belly, my limbs felt heavy, and my head was filled with the haze of a long night of drink and song. I wasn't so drunk that I couldn't walk, but just enough that I figured climbing the mountain road home in the dark wasn't worth the effort.

I pulled three silver coins from my pouch and set them on the counter before Um, who was still wiping down tankards, his cheeks as red as embers from the fire.

"A room for the night," I muttered.

Um chuckled, sliding the coins off the counter. "Aye, second door on the right upstairs. Try not to break anything."

I grunted, taking my tankard of Mellow Tar with me, climbing the stone steps to the upper floor of the Snoring Bear. The rooms were small but comfortable, meant for travelers or drunken regulars like myself. I locked the door behind me, set my tankard on the bedside table, and began untying my beard, my fingers moving through the familiar routine of braiding it back up for sleep.

Just as I was about to crawl into bed, there came a knock at the door.

I sighed, rubbing my face. "Who in the fiery pits could that be at this hour?"

I swung the door open, a frown already on my face, but it faded slightly when I saw who was standing there.

Lais.

She was young, pretty in the way dwarven women could be—sharp features, well-kept auburn hair braided in golden bands. Her dress was fitted just right, leaving little to the imagination, and her smile had the kind of playful mischief that had led many a drunkard to spend more silver than they intended.

"Need some company for the night, Grandmaster?" she asked, her voice smooth as honeyed ale.

I stroked my beard, considering.

"How much?"

"Two silver," she said sweetly.

I let out a breath. It had been a long time since I'd let myself enjoy a warm bed with warm company.

I stepped aside. "Come in."

She slipped past me, sitting on the edge of the bed with a knowing smile.

"I'll fetch us some more ale," she said, rising again. "One shouldn't work without refreshment."

She returned moments later with two tankards, and soon enough, we were drinking, talking, laughing.

And then—well, the ale wasn't the only thing keeping us busy for hours.

The morning light filtered through the small tavern window, falling across the tangle of sheets and limbs.

I woke up to Lais stirring beside me, her hair messy but satisfied, stretching like a well-fed cat.

I pulled out two silver from my pouch and set them on the bedside table. "For the company."

She took the coins, rolling them between her fingers with a smile. "Pleasure doing business, Grandmaster."

I pulled on my boots, straightened my tunic, and buckled my belt. I needed food, water, and a proper job.

By the time I stepped into the Guild Quarter, I was clear-headed again, though my purse was significantly lighter.

Borik Stonewright was waiting for me in the Guild Council chamber, tapping a thick ledger with one stubby finger.

"Gimil, we've got a task for you," he said. "You'll need to travel to Dûm'Zarak—the Duergar city. We need Nightglass to reinforce the foundations of Karad'Thul's Great Hall. And as you know, Duergar don't part with their goods easily."

I grunted, folding my arms. "And how much coin am I working with?"

Borik slid a heavy pouch of silver across the table. "One thousand silver. More than enough for a fair trade."

I scoffed. "With Duergar? This will barely cover a handful of stones."

"Aye," Borik sighed. "Which is why we trust you to haggle—or find another way. We need that stone, Gimil. Get it done."

I took the coin purse, fastened it to my belt, and left the hall.

It was time to travel deep underground.

The journey down into the depths was long and cold.

The road to Dûm’Zarak wound through deep tunnels, where the air grew thick and the light of Karad’Thul faded behind me. Glowing fungi lit parts of the stone corridors, casting eerie blue and green glows along the walls.

The smell of sulfur and damp rock filled my nose as I stepped into the domain of the Duergar.

Dûm’Zarak was a shadowed city, its architecture jagged and brutal, built from blackened stone, its towers like fangs biting into the cavernous ceiling. Unlike Karad’Thul, where lanterns and braziers burned warm, the Duergar preferred dim, red-lit corridors, where shadows stretched long and menacing.

The streets were filled with whispering traders, silent enforcers, and hooded figures watching from darkened corners. No songs, no laughter—just the quiet hum of industry, the distant clang of mining picks, and the occasional grunt of merchants exchanging goods.

Duergar had little love for surface dwarves.

I met Thalgrim Blacktongue, the foreman of the Nightglass mines, in a low-ceilinged stone chamber near the heart of the city. His skin was ashen gray, his eyes narrow and black, and his tone was laced with suspicion.

"You want Nightglass, surface dwarf?" Thalgrim sneered, crossing his arms. "Then you pay in gold, not silver."

I tossed the pouch of one thousand silver onto the stone table.

"This is what I have," I said.

Thalgrim laughed coldly, shaking his head. "This will buy you enough Nightglass to pave a single step, not reinforce an entire foundation."

I gritted my teeth. The bastard wasn’t wrong—Duergar always demanded more.

Then I had an idea.

I glanced toward the citadel gates leading deeper into Dûm’Zarak. They were crumbling, their hinges rusted, their stone foundations cracked.

I turned back to Thalgrim. "You want gold, but what you need is craftsmanship."

Thalgrim’s eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean your gates are falling apart. The way I see it, you need a master craftsman more than you need gold. I’ll repair them—properly, the dwarven way—and in return, you give me the Nightglass."

Thalgrim considered, rubbing his chin. After a long moment, he nodded. "Fine. You fix the gates, and we'll trade."

I rolled up my sleeves, pulled out my tools, and got to work.

The stonework was chipped, the iron hinges corroded, the engraved reliefs worn down by centuries of decay.

I measured, cut, and carved new stone blocks, shaping them to fit seamlessly into the damaged areas. I reinforced the hinges with freshly forged steel, ensuring they wouldn't grind and crack under pressure.

For hours, I carved, polished, and reinforced, restoring the gates to their former strength.

By the time I was done, the citadel stood tall once more, its gates worthy of a Duergar fortress.

Thalgrim inspected the work, nodding in approval. "A fair trade, surface dwarf."

He gestured to his men, and soon, several crates of Nightglass were loaded onto my cart.

The job was done.

I took the reins and turned back toward the road home.

The creaking of wooden wheels and the rhythmic clopping of hooves echoed along the narrow mountain road as I made my way back toward Karad'Thul. The air was thin and crisp, the peaks above crowned with snow, while below, the valleys stretched endlessly, bathed in the golden light of the afternoon sun.

Behind me, the cart was loaded with crates of Nightglass, a rare mineral essential for reinforcing the Great Hall's foundation. The obsidian-like stone shimmered faintly, absorbing light instead of reflecting it. Hard as dwarven steel, resistant to time and weight, it was worth its weight in gold.

And apparently, I wasn't the only one who knew it.

As I rounded a bend, a figure stepped onto the road, blocking my path. A Duergar.

He was cloaked in dark leathers, his ashen skin blending with the shadows cast by the cliffs. A jagged scar ran across his left cheek, his eyes cold and calculating. He was alone, but I knew better than to assume he was unprepared.

He raised a calloused hand, signaling me to stop.

"Hand over the cart," he barked, his voice sharp like a blade. "And you won't have to die today, surface rat."

I exhaled through my nose, shifting slightly in my seat. I had no weapon on me—I'd left my blade back in Karad'Thul, not expecting trouble from this errand. But that didn't mean I was defenseless.

I leaned forward slightly, resting my arms lazily on my knees. "It's just supplies for a builder's project," I said in a calm, measured voice. "Nothing of real value. Wouldn't be worth your trouble."

The Duergar sneered, his fingers twitching toward his belt. "You lie. I saw you leave Dûm'Zarak. I know what's in those crates."

I gritted my teeth. No easy way out of this.

The bandit took a step forward, pulling a wicked, hooked knife from his belt. "Last chance, dwarf. Hand over the cart, or I'll cut it from your corpse."

So be it.

The Duergar lunged, blade flashing.

I twisted to the side, narrowly avoiding the first slash, but he was fast—too fast to outrun.

I brought my forearm up just in time to block a second strike, feeling the sting of metal graze my sleeve.

Then, I moved.

A fist to the jaw—hard, heavy, knuckle-first. The Duergar staggered back, but he was tough. He recovered quickly, snarling as he swung again.

I caught his wrist mid-strike, twisting it sharply, forcing him to drop the knife. He grunted in pain, but he was strong, using his other arm to slam an elbow into my ribs.

I grunted as the impact shook my bones, but I grabbed him by the collar of his tunic, driving my forehead into his nose.

A sickening crunch—then a cry of pain.

The Duergar stumbled back, blood dripping from his broken nose. I didn't give him time to recover.

I lunged forward, grappling him by the shoulders, forcing him toward the edge of the road where the mountain fell into a sheer drop.

We wrestled, kicking up dust and loose gravel, our boots skidding over the uneven ground.

He snarled, clawed at my face, tried to sink his teeth into my arm.

I roared, slamming my fist into his gut, sending him reeling backward.

Then, I reached to my belt.

My hammer—a small one, used for carving—was still there.

I ripped it free, gripping the handle tightly.

The Duergar lunged one last time, but I swung the hammer up, cracking it straight into his temple.

His body went rigid, his legs giving out beneath him. He slumped to the ground, his lifeless eyes staring at nothing.

The fight was over.

I took a deep breath, wiping blood from my lip. My knuckles ached, and my ribs throbbed, but I was still standing.

I bent down, searched his belt, and found a small pouch of coins—his last spoils, perhaps. I took it. A dead bandit had no need for silver.

Without another glance, I climbed back onto my cart and flicked the reins.

The horse snorted and started forward again, carrying us toward Karad'Thul.

By the time I reached Karad'Thul's Great Hall, the masons and builders were already gathered, waiting for the Nightglass to arrive.

The foundation of the hall was vast and ancient, its stones laid by dwarves centuries before. Over time, erosion and weight had begun to wear down certain sections, threatening the very stability of the city's grandest structure.

Nightglass was the answer—a mineral that, when melted down and layered, became stronger than steel.

I helped unload the crates, setting the obsidian-colored stones near the great forge where they would be processed.

The work began immediately.

The stones were fed into the great smelters, where the hottest forges of Karad'Thul waited. The heat had to be precise—too hot, and the Nightglass would become brittle; too cool, and it wouldn't melt properly.

We stoked the flames, adding bellows of air, ensuring the perfect balance of heat and intensity. Slowly, the black stone began to glow, turning from solid to molten, a shimmering, dark silver that pulsed with an eerie glow.

With thick iron ladles, we scooped the molten Nightglass and carefully poured it into the carved trenches of the Great Hall's foundation. The substance oozed like thick tar, settling into every crack, binding the stones together.

Once the pouring was complete, we had to cool the Nightglass in phases. Too quick, and it would crack—too slow, and it wouldn't harden properly.

We used controlled cooling stones, placing them along the hardened channels, letting the material set without stress fractures.

I knelt down, running my gloved hand over the newly reinforced foundation.

The Nightglass had hardened perfectly, its black sheen glinting in the torchlight.

I let out a slow, satisfied breath.

The Great Hall would stand strong for another thousand years.

Borik Stonewright clapped me on the back, his rough voice filled with approval.

"Fine work, Gimil. You saved us a fortune in repairs."

I nodded. "That's what a Grandmaster does."

I stood, stretching my aching muscles, feeling the weight of the day settle in.

The Nightglass was laid, and the city was safe.

But I knew one thing for certain—this wouldn't be my last job.

Something else was coming, and whatever it was, I would be ready.

I made my way back to the Guild Hall to collect my payment.

Borik Stonewright, the Guild Treasurer, was waiting for me, seated behind a heavy stone desk, counting out silver coins with the precision of a master craftsman.

"Good work, Gimil," he said, sliding a leather pouch across the desk. "That's a hundred silver for your efforts—fifty for the bridge, fifty for securing the Nightglass."

I took the pouch, feeling the weight of hard-earned coin in my palm. Silver had a good feel to it—a proper reward for proper work.

I nodded. "Appreciate it, Borik."

"Enjoy yourself tonight," he chuckled. "You've earned it."

That was my plan.

By the time I reached The Snoring Bear, the tavern was bustling, as it always was in the evening hours.

I found my usual seat near the hearth, stretching out my sore legs as I signaled for a meal.

Um waddled over, wiping his hands on his apron. "The usual?"

"Aye," I said. "Steak and potatoes, and a strong ale."

Minutes later, a steaming plate was set before me, the rich scent of seared meat and buttered potatoes filling my senses. A fine meal for a hard day.

I ate slowly, savoring each bite, letting the warmth of the fire and ale settle into my bones.

Once my plate was cleared, I took out my pipe, packed it with fresh hemp from my garden, and struck a match. The familiar earthy scent curled around my beard as I leaned back in my chair.

The tavern hummed with life. The usual chatter of merchants, miners, and smiths filled the air. Laughter echoed, boots stomped in rhythm to a bard's flute and drum, and tankards clanked in celebration of another day's toil.

But I was content to sit in the corner, smoking and watching.

When sleep called, I made my way upstairs, paid three silver for a room, and collapsed onto the bed.

Morning came with the clatter of hooves and carts outside. I sat up, stretched, and rubbed my face awake.

I barely had time for breakfast before a courier from the Miner's Guild arrived.

"Grandmaster Gimil," the young dwarf said with a respectful nod. "The Guild has requested your presence. We need an inspection of the mines—there've been some concerns about safety."

That caught my attention. A weak mine shaft could mean disaster for the workers.

"Aye," I said. "I'll be there shortly."

I packed my tools, a sheaf of parchment, charcoal, and my measuring stick, then made my way toward the mining district.

The entrance to the mines was marked by a pair of massive iron doors, inscribed with runes of protection and prosperity. The moment I stepped inside, the temperature dropped, the air heavy with the scent of damp earth and stone dust.

The tunnels stretched deep into the mountain, dimly lit by lanterns and the occasional glowing crystal embedded in the rock.

All around me, miners were hard at work. Pickaxes clanged against stone, echoing down the tunnels. Wooden carts creaked, piled high with iron, copper, and silver ore. Voices shouted commands, calling for support beams, water barrels, and fresh air circulation.

I set to work immediately.

I walked the main shafts first, examining the load-bearing beams and stone reinforcements.

Some were solid, their timbers still fresh, but others—

I ran a hand across a support beam and frowned. The wood was soft, splintering at the touch. Rotten. A collapse waiting to happen.

I took out my charcoal and made notations on my parchment, marking areas that needed immediate repairs.

After an hour of inspecting, my rough map was finished—a network of tunnels, support beams, and problem areas.

Time to get to work.

I signaled to a group of miners and masons, directing them toward the weakest shafts.

We hauled in fresh-cut timber, each log measured and shaped to replace the weakened beams.

I oversaw the bracing of the shafts, ensuring each beam was secured with iron bolts and stone wedges.

Good airflow was essential—without it, coal dust and fumes could suffocate the workers.

I marked blocked airways, signaling for crews to clear debris and reinforce tunnels with wooden grates to prevent cave-ins.

Certain sections had crumbling walls, too unstable to mine further.

Using stone mortar and iron braces, we reinforced the weaker areas, ensuring the tunnels would hold.

The work was steady, and by midday, I took a short rest, wiping sweat from my brow.

A miner handed me a jug of cold mountain water, and I drank deeply, letting the crisp taste wash away the dust.

Nearby, miners rested against their carts, eating salted bread and dried meat, their faces streaked with soot.

I sat on a wooden crate, lit my pipe, and took a few long, slow puffs.

The scent of burning tobacco mixed with the rich, earthy scent of the mines.

I watched as miners loaded carts with freshly mined ore, their strong hands gripping pickaxes, their voices loud and full of purpose.

Despite the dangers, this was their life.

And it was my job to keep them safe.

By the time the last beam was secured, the final stones mortared, and the air tunnels cleared, the mine was stronger than before.

The foreman, a burly dwarf named Rurik Ironvein, clapped me on the back.

"Fine work, Grandmaster," he said. "We'll rest easier knowing these tunnels will hold."

I nodded. "Safety first. Always."

With my tools packed up and my map complete, I left the mines, heading back toward the Guild Hall.

Another job done. Another day's work well spent.

The Guild Hall was quieter than usual when I stepped inside, but I knew better than to assume that meant there was no work left for me.

Borik Stonewright sat behind his usual desk, ledger open, scratching down notes with a thick charcoal stick. He barely looked up when I approached.

"Another job for you, Gimil," he said, flipping a page. "A noble in the Silverstone District wants a hidden safe installed—a cavity behind a bookcase. Simple work, but it pays well."

I raised a brow. "How well?"

"Twenty silver," he grunted. "More if you do it quickly and cleanly."

I nodded. "Where?"

"Lord Mavrik Goldveil's estate. He's expecting you."

A noble's job. That meant fine stonework, high expectations, and no room for mistakes.

I gathered my tools, slung my leather satchel over my shoulder, and made my way toward the Noble District.

The Noble District was a world apart from the rest of Karad'Thul. Wide stone streets, gilded iron gates, houses adorned with carved reliefs of ancestors and gods. Balconies of polished marble, gardens of rare mountain blooms, artisans painting murals on archways—it was wealth made stone.

I arrived at Goldveil's estate and was led inside by a servant in fine velvet.

Lord Mavrik Goldveil was a short, round-bellied dwarf with sharp eyes and an even sharper beard, braided with silver clasps. He wore a deep green tunic, lined with gold thread, and his rings clicked against each other as he clasped his hands.

"You must be Grandmaster Gimil," he said, nodding. "The Guild speaks highly of your craftsmanship."

"Aye," I said simply, glancing around the lavish stone chamber. "Where's the work to be done?"

"This way," he gestured, leading me into a study lined with bookshelves, a massive hearth, and finely woven tapestries.

He pointed to one of the shelves against the far wall.

"The idea," he explained, "is to have this bookcase move on small rails, so that when shifted aside, it reveals a hidden cavity for a safe. No hinges, no obvious seams."

I nodded, running my hand along the polished oak frame. "Solid work, but it'll need some cutting. You got the safe?"

Mavrik gestured toward a heavy iron strongbox, standing nearby. Dwarven-forged, thick-walled, double-bolted.

"That'll do," I said, rolling up my sleeves. "Let's get to work."

I took out my measuring stick and charcoal, marking the precise dimensions of the cavity on the stone wall behind the bookcase.

I chiseled away at the stone, carving out a clean, rectangular space. Dust filled the air as I worked, hammering away the excess rock. After an hour, the cavity was deep enough to fit the safe snugly.

The strongbox was heavy, but I managed to slide it into place, ensuring it was flush against the back wall. Bolts were driven into the surrounding stone, anchoring it securely.

I removed the bookcase, fitted small iron rails into the floor, and adjusted brackets behind the shelf so it could be pushed aside smoothly.Once everything was aligned perfectly, I reattached the bookshelf.

I tested the mechanism—a gentle push, and the shelf glided silently to reveal the hidden compartment. A solid job.

As I worked, Lord Goldveil watched from his seat, sipping a fine goblet of spiced mead.

"Tell me, Grandmaster," he said, "what's the most secure safe model you've seen?"

I wiped stone dust from my hands. "Depends. The best ones have a combination lock, not just a key. Hidden mechanisms, thick iron plating, some even with rune seals. But no safe is truly unbreakable—it's just about making it more trouble than it's worth for a thief."

Mavrik nodded. "I imagine you've seen your fair share of security work."

"Aye," I said, tightening the last bolt. "Fought for twenty years in my younger days. Seen plenty of lockbreakers, conmen, and straight-up brigands."

Mavrik raised a brow. "A warrior and a craftsman. That's a rare combination."

I shrugged. "You fight when you have to. You build when you can."

Mavrik chuckled. "Then I may have another task for you."

He leaned forward. "I have some business in a nearby village—a shipment of jewelry that needs to be brought back safely. My lending business deals in gold, gems, and valuables.

"But," he continued, "the roads aren't **as safe as they used to be. Bandits. Highwaymen. I could use a strong hand for protection."

I stroked my beard, considering. "How much?"

"Fifty silver for the journey," he said. "Food and ale included, of course."

That was good coin for a simple escort.

I nodded. "Aye. I'll take the job."

Four hours later, the hidden safe was finished, the bookcase slid back into place smoothly, and the strongbox was securely installed.

Mavrik inspected the work and nodded in approval. "Impressive craftsmanship. As expected from a Grandmaster."

With business settled, we gathered provisions, harnessed the horses, and climbed into the noble's carriage.

With business settled, we gathered provisions, harnessed the horses, and climbed into the noble's carriage.

The wheels of the sturdy dwarven carriage clattered over the stone-paved streets as we made our way through Karad'Thul's Guild Quarter, heading toward the Warrior's Guild.

Mavrik sat beside me, straightening his embroidered tunic, his rings clinking together as he adjusted his belt. "We should stop at the Warrior's Guild before we go," he said. "I'd rather not travel unprepared."

I nodded. "Aye. No telling who's lurking on the roads these days."

The Warrior's Guild stood near the city's outer gates, a fortress-like structure of black iron and stone, banners of the Guild's insignia—a crossed sword and hammer—fluttering in the cool mountain wind.

Inside, the hall reeked of sweat, leather, and steel. Warriors trained in the sparring pits, the sounds of clashing blades and grunting voices filling the air.

At the far end of the chamber, a broad-shouldered dwarf with a scarred cheek and a braided red beard leaned over a table, speaking with a few recruits.

This was Borik Steelward, Guildmaster of the Warriors' Guild—a veteran of dozens of battles, a friend to many, an enemy to more.

Mavrik strode up with a smile. "Borik, you old brute. Still sending green lads to the pits?"

Borik looked up and grinned. "Mavrik Goldveil. What brings you down from your cushioned halls?"

"Work," Mavrik said. "Need an escort, and Grandmaster Gimil here is lending his hand."

Borik turned his sharp eyes to me. "Good to see you still earning your coin the hard way, Gimil. Figured you'd be chiseling stone and puffing on that pipe of yours."

I chuckled. "Aye, but every now and then, I stretch my arms for other work."

Borik nodded approvingly. "Then you'd best gear up before heading out."

I took a short sword from the armory, strapped a round, sturdy iron-banded shield to my back, and donned a layered leather cuirass—light enough to move, thick enough to stop a blade.

Mavrik chuckled. "You look ready for war."

"Never hurts to be prepared," I muttered.

With that, we mounted up and set off toward the mountain road.

The stone-paved streets of Karad'Thul faded behind us as the carriage descended the winding paths of the mountain road.

The journey was uneventful. The mountain air was cool and crisp, carrying the scent of pine and damp earth. Below, the valley stretched wide, the farmland dotted with grazing goats and cultivated fields.

Mavrik pulled out a silver flask, took a sip, then passed it to me.

"Drink?" he asked.

I took a swig. Spiced dwarven brandy. Strong and warm. "Good stuff," I said, wiping my mouth.

Mavrik leaned back in his seat. "You ever think of getting into merchant work, Gimil? You've got the hands of a builder, but you could make good coin in the trade business."

I exhaled, looking at the mountains rolling past. "I like building things that last. Gold comes and goes, but a bridge, a hall, a strong wall—those remain."

Mavrik nodded, stretching his legs. "Aye. Can’t argue with that. But still—no harm in a little wealth. Silver’s the blood of the world, my friend."

I grunted, shaking my head. "And it stains just the same as blood."

We rode in companionable silence, the clopping of hooves filling the quiet spaces between words.

By midday, we reached the village—a small outpost nestled between the foothills and the rolling plains.

Mavrik climbed down from the carriage. "Won’t take long," he said. "Wait here."

I stayed by the wagon, keeping my sword loose in its scabbard.

After a short time, Mavrik returned, a wooden chest in his hands, its metal locks gleaming.

"Let’s move," he said. "I’d rather not linger with this much wealth in the open."

We set out again, making our way back toward Karad’Thul.

The road narrowed, winding through a small grove of dark trees, where shadows pooled like ink between the trunks.

Then, a figure stepped onto the path.

He was armored, his cloak tattered, a long sword resting against his shoulder.

He held up a hand, stopping the carriage.

"What’s in the wagon?" he demanded.

Mavrik stiffened, his hand gripping the reins. His expression darkened.

"I know you," he muttered.

The armored man grinned, stepping closer. His face was gaunt, his eyes sharp with something cruel and unhinged.

"I used to be known," the man sneered. "Once, I was Sir Darius Ironbane—a paladin of the high order. But you know what happened, don’t you, Goldveil?"

Mavrik’s jaw tightened. "I do. You were stripped of your knighthood. For treason."

Darius’s grin widened, but his eyes burned with hatred. "And now, I take what I wish. So, again—what’s in the wagon?"

Mavrik’s hand twitched. "Nothing that concerns you."

Darius’s face twisted. "Don’t test me, Goldveil. I will cut you open and take what I want."

I gritted my teeth.

"Get off the road," I said evenly.

Darius’s eyes snapped to me, his grip tightening on his sword.

"Or what?" he sneered.

I let out a slow breath. "Or you’ll wish you had."

Darius lunged first, his blade flashing in the dim light of the grove.

I barely had time to raise my shield, catching the full force of his strike—a heavy, two-handed blow that sent a shock reverberating down my arm.

He was strong.

Too strong for a man who had lost everything.

I pushed him back with a grunt, taking a step forward and slashing with my short sword, aiming for his ribs.

He twisted just in time, my blade scraping off his breastplate, leaving only a deep scratch in the metal.

"Not bad," he sneered, his breath ragged with hatred. "But not good enough!"

His next swing came in low, aiming for my legs—I barely stepped back in time, but he was already moving, shifting his stance like a man born to fight.

His blade came up from below—a sudden, precise uppercut swing aimed at my chest.

I raised my shield just in time, the sword biting into the iron rim, slicing off a chunk of the outer wood layer.

With a roar, I countered—stepping in close, slamming my shield into his face.

The impact sent a spray of blood flying from his nose, but he only staggered back, grinning through the crimson dripping down his chin.

"You fight well," he admitted, wiping his mouth, "but I’ve killed better men than you."

He came at me again, faster this time, swinging his blade in a wide arc, forcing me to duck and weave.

Our swords clashed, steel singing through the mountain air, each strike heavier than the last.

He struck low, I parried. He came high, I blocked. He lunged straight for my throat, I sidestepped, driving my shield into his ribs, making him stumble.

But then—a mistake.

As I stepped forward to press the attack, he spun suddenly, swinging his pommel at my temple. CRACK. White-hot pain exploded in my skull. I staggered back, vision spinning, blood trickling down my forehead.

Before I could recover, he kicked my legs out from under me, sending me crashing to the ground. I hit hard, my back slamming into a jagged rock, my breath ripped from my lungs.

Darius was on me in an instant, his blade raised for the killing blow. "You die here," he growled.

My vision was blurry from blood, but my hands still worked. As his blade came down, I rolled to the side, grabbing a handful of dirt and loose gravel. With a desperate throw, I flung it into his eyes.

Darius roared in frustration, stumbling back, momentarily blinded. That was all I needed.

With a feral growl, I pushed myself up, gripping my sword tight, and charged forward. My blade met flesh. Darius cried out as my sword bit into his side, slicing through leather and cloth, drawing a deep, ugly wound along his ribs.

He swung wildly, pain fueling his rage, but I caught his strike on my shield, forcing him off balance. I pivoted, shifting my stance, and then drove my sword into his shoulder, twisting the blade until he screamed in agony.

Blood poured freely now, staining his once-pristine armor. His face twisted in pain, then fury. "You bastard—!"

With one last act of pure defiance, he lashed out, throwing a brutal punch that cracked against my jaw, making my head snap back.

I saw stars, tasted blood in my mouth, but I held my ground. He reached for his sword again, but I moved first. With a roar, I swung my shield with every ounce of strength left in me. It smashed into his jaw, sending teeth flying, snapping his head to the side. I didn't let up.

I grabbed his arm, twisted, and wrenched it back—until I felt bone snap like dry wood. Darius let out a horrid scream, his sword clattering to the dirt.

I didn't give him the chance to recover. With one final, brutal thrust, I drove my sword straight through his heart. His body stiffened. His eyes widened in shock. Then he collapsed, lifeless, into the bloodied dirt.

I stood there, breathing hard, my sword dripping red, my shield dented and scratched.

Mavrik, still in the carriage, stared down at the body. "By the gods…"

I wiped the blood from my brow, spitting to the side.

"He was a tough bastard," I muttered. "But he was already dead—he just didn't know it yet."

Mavrik exhaled. "I won’t mourn him. He made his choice."

I nodded, grabbing a rag from my belt, wiping the blood off my blade.

"Let’s go," I said, climbing back onto the carriage. "I need a drink."

Mavrik chuckled weakly. "After that? So do I."

We left the broken body of the fallen knight behind and rode on, the mountains looming ahead, Karad’Thul waiting in the distance.

Rest

The mountain road stretched before us, the wagon wheels creaking as we made our way back to Karad’Thul. The air was cool and crisp, carrying the scent of pine and damp earth, and the first stars had begun to blink awake in the darkening sky.

Mavrik reached into his coat pocket, pulling out a silver flask.

"Here," he said, offering it to me. "A toast to survival."

I took the flask, uncorked it, and took a deep swig. The brandy was strong, burning warm and smooth down my throat, chasing away the last aches of the fight.

"Aye," I muttered, wiping my mouth, "to survival."

Mavrik chuckled, leaning back against the wagon seat, watching the road ahead. "You ever get tired of this?"

I exhaled, rolling my shoulders. "Aye. But work is work."

"That it is," Mavrik agreed. "And work never stops, does it?"

I didn’t answer. Just took another swig of brandy and let the silence settle between us.

By the time we reached Mavrik’s estate, the lanterns were already lit, casting a warm golden glow across the Noble District’s pristine stone streets.

The chest of jewelry was safely stored away inside, and Mavrik paid me in silver before climbing his marble steps and disappearing inside.

From there, I made my way to the Warrior’s Guild, intending to return my gear and be done with the day.

But just as I was unstrapping my leather cuirass, Borik Steelward approached, his arms crossed over his broad chest.

"There’s shortage of mercenaries, Gimil," he said bluntly. "You handled yourself well against that fallen knight—we could use you here. If you’re willing."

I exhaled, rubbing my temple.

"I’ll consider it," I said. "Truth be told, I was hoping my warrior days were over."

Borik gave a gruff laugh. "Warriors never retire, Gimil. They just find different battles."

I nodded, handed over my borrowed gear, and left the guildhall behind.

By the time I reached The Snoring Bear, the tavern was alive with its usual fire-lit chaos—dwarves laughing, drinking, eating, stomping their boots to the beat of a bard’s drum.

I took my usual seat near the hearth, ordered a tankard of Mellow Tar ale, and a plate of roasted boar with mushrooms and bread.

The first sip of ale was perfect—dark, rich, strong enough to ease the last aches of the day.

The boar was tender, the mushrooms soaked in butter, the bread warm and crisp.

For a while, I just ate, drank, and listened to the tavern’s music.

Life was simple in moments like these.

With my stomach full and my mind clearer, I stepped out into the night air, packing my pipe with fresh hemp from my pouch.

Striking a match, I lit it, inhaling slow, letting the earthy smoke curl around my beard.

The road home was peaceful, the distant torches of Karad’Thul glowing behind me, the stars spread wide above the valley.

A cool breeze rustled through the trees as I made my way down the winding path toward my village.

By the time I reached my cottage, the moon was high, silver light spilling over the wheat fields and fruit orchards surrounding my home.

I stepped into my garden, where the apple trees stood tall, their branches heavy with ripe fruit.

I grabbed a wooden basket from the porch and started picking.

The apples were firm, their skins smooth and red, the scent of sweet fruit filling the air as I gently twisted each one free from the branches.

Once the basket was full, I carried it to my outdoor worktable and began sorting. I set aside the best apples for eating fresh. The rest, I washed, then sliced into thick wedges, removing

the cores. I tossed the sliced apples into a large wooden press, then cranked the handle, watching as golden juice trickled into a waiting clay jug.

I poured myself a cup of fresh juice, took a long sip, and sighed.

Sweet, crisp, perfect.

The remaining juice was poured into an oak barrel in my cellar. I added a sprinkle of brewer's yeast, then sealed the barrels, letting them begin their slow fermentation process.

In a few months, I'd have a fine batch of apple wine—sweet, strong, and perfect for the colder months.

With my tasks finished, I poured myself one last cup of apple juice, took it to my porch, and sat down with my pipe.

The fields stretched before me, the wheat swaying gently under the moonlight.

It had been a long day.

A hard day.

But it was my kind of day.

I took a long draw of my pipe, exhaled slowly, and let my thoughts drift.

The night passed in peaceful silence, my muscles heavy with exhaustion as I drifted into deep, dreamless sleep.

But morning came sooner than I would have liked.

A sharp knock on my door pulled me from my rest. Groggy and still half-buried in my blankets, I grumbled under my breath and dragged myself up.

I opened the door to find a young dwarf in a royal courier's uniform, standing at attention. His boots were polished, his beard neatly trimmed, and his chest puffed out like he had a kingdom's worth of importance on his shoulders.

"Grandmaster Gimil," he said, standing stiff as a hammer's handle. "You are summoned to work for His Majesty, King Thrain Stonehelm."

That woke me up quick enough.

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes. "And what does the King need of me?"

"The nobleman Mavrik Goldveil has spoken highly of your craftsmanship," the messenger continued. "His Majesty wishes to commission a new vault, and your skills in stonework and construction are required."

I scratched my beard, considering. A job for the King himself. That was no small thing. It meant good coin, high expectations, and no room for failure.

I nodded. "Tell His Majesty I'll be there by midday."

After washing my face, packing my tools and measuring sticks, and grabbing a bit of bread and dried meat for the road, I saddled up Stonehoof and rode back toward Karad'Thul.

The morning air was crisp, the mountain roads quiet, save for the distant chirping of birds and the occasional cart rolling toward the city.

By the time I reached the gates of the Hard Keep, the sun was high, casting sharp golden light over the towering walls of the King's fortress.

The castle of Durand'Zar was built into the mountainside itself, its black stone walls engraved with the ancient history of Karad'Thul.

Guards in polished steel armor stood at attention, axes resting against their shoulders. One of them—an older dwarf with a greying beard and a scar running across his brow—gave me a nod.

"Grandmaster Gimil," he said, stepping aside. "The workers are already waiting for you inside."

I dismounted, handed Stonehoof off to a stable hand, and followed the guard into the castle.

The worksite was in a deep chamber below the main halls, carved from solid bedrock, its ceiling held up by thick support beams.

Standing near a long stone table, inspecting blueprints and scrolls, were the others who would work on the project. Master Rurik Stonemantle was an elderly mason, broad-shouldered, his face lined with age, but his hands still steady as iron clamps. Duril Forgehand was a metalworker, tall for a dwarf, his arms thick from years of shaping steel, a forge-scorched apron tied around his waist. Borrik Oakvein was a younger stonemason, eager-eyed, already running his fingers over the plans like he was itching to start carving.

As I approached, Rurik glanced up, grunting in greeting.

"Ah, Gimil. You're here," he said. "Good. We're going to need your hands for this."

I folded my arms. "What's the job exactly?"

Duril Forgehand tapped the blueprints on the table, rolling them open for me to see.

The plans were detailed and precise, outlining a vault chamber carved into the castle's lower halls. Walls of reinforced stone, layered with Nightglass to prevent cracking. A metal vault door, thick as a war shield, with a triple-bolted mechanism. Hidden pressure locks and a rotating tumbler system to prevent forced entry.

Rurik stroked his grey-streaked beard. "The King wants this done properly—no shortcuts, no weak points. This vault will house the kingdom’s most precious relics and treasures. It has to be unbreakable."

I nodded, already running the work in my mind.

"Aye," I said. "Let’s get to it."

We started by measuring out the exact dimensions, using chalk and charcoal to mark the depth and width on the stone walls. Pickaxes and chisels struck against the rock, breaking through the bedrock layer by layer. I led a team of stonecutters, ensuring the walls were carved evenly, leaving no loose, fractured edges. The tunnels echoed with the sounds of hammering, dust rising in thick clouds as we shaped the vault’s foundation.

Rurik grunted as he wiped sweat from his brow. "Feels like carving through the bones of the mountain itself."

"Aye," I muttered, smoothing the stone surface with a grinding tool. "But that’s what makes it strong."

We laid a layer of Nightglass along the walls, sealing it in place with molten mortar, ensuring no cracks could form. The ceiling beams were reinforced with iron brackets, giving extra support in case of earthquakes or siege damage. Each section was checked for weak points—nothing was left to chance.

Borrik, the younger mason, peered at the walls with awe. "This thing could survive a dragon’s breath."

I chuckled, running a hand over the smooth Nightglass. "That’s the idea."

Duril oversaw the metalwork, hauling in a massive iron door, engraved with dwarven runes for protection.

I helped him position the hinges, securing them deep into the stone.

The locking mechanism was intricate—a combination of tumbler locks, key slots, and pressure-sealed bolts.

Duril grinned as he fastened the last reinforcement plate. "No thief alive is breaking through this."

"Not unless they bring a siege ram," I muttered.

We ran a final check on the structure, testing the door’s movement and the locks. Every stone was tight, every mechanism smooth.

Rurik stepped back, arms crossed. "That’s a vault fit for a King."

I dusted off my hands. "Aye. That’s work to be proud of."

As we finished sealing the last section, a messenger arrived from the throne room, bringing a heavy leather pouch of coins.

"His Majesty is pleased with your work," the courier said, handing the payment to Rurik.

I received my fair share—250 silver pieces, shining in the torchlight.

As the dust settled, I leaned against the newly built vault, exhaling slowly.

Another job complete.

After the final inspection of the vault, we had barely wiped the dust from our hands when a royal attendant arrived at the worksite.

"His Majesty, King Thrain Stonehelm, invites you to dine at his table this evening," the attendant announced. "A celebration in honor of the new vault's completion."

Rurik, Duril, Borrik, and I exchanged glances—we weren't exactly the type to sit at a noble's feast, but when the King invites you to dinner, you don't refuse.

"Fine food and finer drink?" Duril muttered with a grin. "I won't argue with that."

That evening, we gathered in the Great Hall of Durand'Zar, a vast chamber adorned with banners of the old kings, carved murals of great battles, and a grand stone hearth burning bright in the center.

A long table stretched before us, filled with roasted meats, spiced vegetables, freshly baked bread, honeyed nuts, and golden goblets of rich red wine.

Seated at the head of the table was King Thrain Stonehelm, his thick beard braided with gold rings, his piercing eyes shadowed by years of rule.

To his left sat several members of the High Council, their robes embroidered with silver thread, their expressions wise and watchful.

Across the table, noblemen and noble ladies whispered among themselves, their jewelry glinting in the torchlight.

And among them sat Isolde.

As we settled in, the King raised his goblet.

"A toast," he said in his deep, gravelly voice. "To the builders, masons, and metalworkers who have ensured the security of our kingdom's treasures. The new vault stands strong, and Karad'Thul will be safer for it."

We raised our goblets, drinking to our hard work and success.

King Thrain leaned forward, rolling the stem of his goblet between his fingers.

"The city is changing," he muttered, almost to himself. "Security is more important than ever. There are whispers in the streets… thieves growing bolder, unrest stirring in the lower quarters."

Rurik scratched his beard. "Aye, Your Majesty. We hear things now and then in the Guild Quarter. Not everyone is happy with the way things are."

The King nodded. "Which is why I thank you all for your work. A strong city needs strong hands."

I caught the glance of one of the High Councilors, an older dwarf with a thin, silver-streaked beard. He was watching me closely, as if he was weighing something in his mind.

But before I could dwell on it, a noble turned to me.

A portly dwarf in a blue tunic trimmed with silver embroidery leaned forward.

"You're Gimil, Grandmaster of the Guilds, aren't you?"

"Aye," I nodded, cutting into a tender slice of roasted lamb.

"I've heard of your work," he continued. "My estate in the Marble District needs some renovations. Perhaps I could arrange for your services?"

I wiped my mouth with a linen cloth and smiled. "If the coin's good, my hammer's ready."

The noble chuckled, tapping his goblet. "We'll speak after the feast."

Across the table, I caught the gaze of Isolde.

She was a refined-looking dwarf, her hair braided in thick, auburn locks, adorned with delicate gold clasps. She had bright eyes, curious and sharp, and she carried herself with the grace of a scholar rather than a noble.

She tilted her head, studying me.

"You're a Grandmaster, aren't you?" she asked.

I nodded. "That's what they tell me."

She smiled. "I've always been fascinated by architecture—the way stone is shaped, the way halls are carved, the strength behind every beam and arch. It's an art as much as it is a science."

I grinned, setting down my fork. "Aye. And few appreciate that. Most only see the end result—not the hundreds of hammer strikes it takes to get there."

She leaned in slightly. "Tell me, then—what's the most impressive structure in all of Karad'Thul?"

I thought for a moment, taking a sip of wine.

"Depends on who you ask," I mused. "If you ask a warrior, they'll say the fortress walls, built to withstand siege and time alike. If you ask a merchant, they'll point to the grand market halls, where the wealth of the world passes through our city. But if you ask me—I'd say it's the bridges."

She raised an eyebrow. "The bridges?"

I nodded. "Aye. Bridges are a promise. They connect, they unite, they hold the weight of generations. A city without bridges is a city divided. A city with strong bridges is a city that lasts."

Isolde smiled, her eyes flickering with intrigue. "That's a beautiful way to look at it, Grandmaster."

I grinned, raising my goblet. "I like to think stone remembers those who treat it well."

She laughed, clinking her goblet against mine.

"A dwarf after my own heart," she said.

As the night wore on, the dining hall filled with conversation and laughter.

The wine flowed freely, filling goblets as toasts were made to the King, the builders, and the strength of Karad'Thul.

The roaring hearth crackled with warmth, and the aroma of spiced meats and baked pastries lingered in the air.

At one point, Duril Forgehand leaned over, nudging me. "Looks like you've caught someone's eye, Gimil."

I rolled my eyes, chuckling. "Just a fellow admirer of stonework."

"Aye," he said, smiling. "And maybe something more."

I just shook my head, taking another sip of wine.

The night was good, the company lively, and for once, I allowed myself to enjoy it.

For tomorrow would bring more work, more tasks, and more calls for the Grandmaster.

But for now, I ate, drank, and enjoyed the moment.

A few days after the King's feast, I found myself in the Marble District, standing outside a wealthy dwarf's estate with my tools slung over my shoulder.

The house belonged to Lord Halrik Bronzeward, a noble with an eye for craftsmanship and a coin purse deep enough to afford the best.

"Grandmaster Gimil," Halrik greeted me as I arrived, his blue silk robe embroidered with gold thread. "I'm glad you could come. My house is in need of some refinements—a touch of proper dwarven craftsmanship."

He led me through the courtyard, where a fine marble fountain gurgled, before stopping at the grand wooden doors of his estate.

"These need ornamentation," he said, running his fingers along the plain wooden frames. "Carvings of mountain reliefs, our family crest, something fitting of our status. And the outer foundation stones have started to crack—I'd like those repaired."

I nodded, rolling up my sleeves. "Aye, I'll take care of it."

The wood was good oak, strong and seasoned, perfect for carving.

I started with the doorframe, sketching out a mountain relief—sharp peaks, deep valleys, and winding rivers, the very image of Karad'Thul's landscape.

With my chisel and mallet, I began the slow, methodical work of shaping the wood. Each strike of the mallet had to be precise, peeling away thin layers of wood like the rock face of a mountain. The sharp ridges of the peaks took form, and the rivers were carved with soft, smooth lines, giving the illusion of flowing water. The Branzeward family crest—a hammer striking an anvil—was etched into the center panel.

Lord Halrik watched, arms folded. "Beautiful work," he murmured. "It's as if the mountains themselves live in the wood."

I grunted, not stopping. "That's the point."

After three hours, the carvings were done, and I carefully applied a varnish to protect the wood from time and wear.

The outer foundation of the house was cracked in several places, likely from settling over the years.

I chipped away the weakened stone, clearing out the loose dust before cutting new blocks to fit.

Each stone had to be shaped to precise measurements, fitting together like a puzzle. I mixed a thick mortar, spreading it between the joints, ensuring a strong bond. Using my mallet, I tapped the new stones into place, making sure each one sat flush against the others. Finally, I sealed the edges, wiping the surface smooth and stepping back to admire the work.

"That should hold for another hundred years," I said, wiping the dust from my hands.

Lord Halrik nodded, satisfied, and paid me twenty silver for the day's work.

"Should I need more work done," he said, "I know where to find you."

I tipped my head in acknowledgment and made my way toward the Snoring Bear Tavern.

The tavern was alive, as always—drunken laughter, stomping boots, and the rich scent of ale and roasted meats.

I took my usual seat, ordered a plate of slow-roasted venison with root vegetables, a hunk of bread, and a tankard of Mellow Tar.

As I ate, my thoughts drifted. The Warrior's Guild had work. Did I really want to return to fighting for coin? I exhaled, taking a deep swig of ale. Work is work.

A dwarf couldn't afford to be too choosy.

Before heading to the Warrior's Guild, I stopped by the armorer's shop.

The old dwarf behind the counter, Bergan Ironhide, looked up as I entered. "Gimil! Back to the warrior's trade?"

"Something like that," I muttered. "Need some leather armor—something sturdy but light."

Bergan nodded and set out a reinforced leather cuirass, stitched with iron threading.

"That'll do," I said, paying the ten silver he asked. I also bought a simple, rounded helmet.

Next, I stopped by the weapon-smith's forge, where a burly dwarf named Toren Blackgrip was hammering a blade into shape.

"I need a short sword," I said.

Toren scratched his beard, then picked up a well-balanced blade with a fine leather grip. "This one suits you."

I tested the weight, nodding. Fifteen silver. A fair price.

With my gear set, I made my way toward the Warrior's Guild.

The Warrior's Guild Hall stood tall and proud, its entrance flanked by iron statues of ancient warlords. Inside, the hall was filled with sparring dwarves, clanging steel, and the gruff voices of mercenaries discussing their latest contracts.

Borik Steelward, the Guildmaster, met me as I entered.

"Gimil," he said with a grin, eyeing my new armor and sword. "Finally decided to return to the warrior's way?"

I shrugged. "Work is work."

Borik nodded. "That it is. And we're short-handed."

He gestured to a board lined with parchment—various job postings nailed into the wood.

Bounties on wanted criminals. Caravan escort missions. City watch patrols. Hunting bandits in the mountain passes.

"You take what suits you," Borik said. "The City Watch pays steady coin, but bounties and escort jobs bring higher risks and higher rewards."

I studied the board, considering.

Borik crossed his arms. "If you want, I can refresh your training, go over some combat techniques—you've still got skill, but it never hurts to sharpen it."

I smiled. "Aye, I won't turn that down."

Borik nodded, then pointed to a suit of plate gauntlets and reinforced boots. "If you're serious, take these. You'll need them."

I took the boots and gloves, replacing my own with the sturdier gear.

"Welcome back to the fold, Grandmaster," Borik said, clapping me on the shoulder. "Now—are you ready to take your first job?"

Old Ways

I hadn't swung a sword in a proper fight in a some time, so before taking on any serious work, Borik and I moved to the sparring yard.

The yard was a wide, dusty ring, surrounded by watching mercenaries, some practicing against straw dummies, others training in pairs.

Borik tossed me a dull-edged practice sword and raised his own.

"Let's see if your old skills are still sharp," he said, stepping into a ready stance.

I grinned, rolling my shoulders. "Let's see if your old bones can keep up."

The first clash of steel rang out as I stepped forward, testing his defenses. Borik was solid, his stance like a fortress, but I knew he was a counter-fighter—he liked to wait for mistakes.

I faked a downward swing, then twisted into a side cut.

He blocked it cleanly, forcing my blade away with a short grin.

"Still got tricks, I see," he muttered.

I didn’t answer—just pressed forward, attacking with quick slashes and sudden feints. Borik parried, dodged, countered, and soon, we were moving faster, testing each other like old rivals.

The young recruits gathered, watching the old veterans go at it.

Finally, Borik caught me with a sudden bash of his shield, making me stumble back.

"Still got it," he grunted, lowering his sword.

I wiped sweat from my brow. "Aye, and so do you."

As I turned, I saw a group of young mercenaries, fresh to the guild, watching with wide eyes.

One of them, a lad barely past his first beard, stepped forward, gripping his sword tight.

"Master Gimil, can you show us some tricks?" he asked.

I chuckled, stepping toward them. "Aye. One thing you brats need to learn—never get comfortable."

I snapped my leg forward, hooking it behind his knee, and sent him face-down into the mud.

Laughter erupted from the watching mercenaries.

The lad grunted, pushing himself up, sputtering.

"You gotta keep yer eye out on surprises," I said, grinning. "Or you'll be eating dirt when it matters."

After cleaning up, Borik pulled me aside. His expression had shifted—more serious now.

"There’s trouble in the woods, Gimil," he said. "A wagon went missing, and we’ve had reports of robberies near the grove east of the city. People have been attacked—some killed, some… worse. I want you to investigate. See if you find anything tied to the crimes."

I frowned, nodding. "Anyone else sent?"

"Not yet," Borik said. "But if you find trouble, I trust you can handle yourself."

I adjusted my sword belt and grunted. "Aye. I’ll see what I can find."

I set out alone, my boots crunching against the dirt path as I rode toward the eastern grove.

The forest was still, save for the occasional rustling of leaves and the distant caw of crows.

After half an hour, I reached the area in question.

It didn’t take long to find signs of trouble. A broken wagon wheel lay half-buried in the grass. A bit farther, the burnt remains of a wagon still smoldered faintly, its blackened wood

cracked and splintered. Scattered goods were strewn about—crushed barrels, torn sacks of grain. Near the edge of the wreck, a woman's ripped clothing lay in the dirt.

I grimaced, my grip tightening on my sword.

This wasn't just a robbery.

I knelt down, studying the tracks.

Footprints—large ones. Too big for dwarves or humans.

Orcs.

I followed the trail into the woods, moving carefully, my hand resting on my sword hilt.

The tracks led deeper into the dense trees, weaving between old oaks and tangled roots.

Then, I spotted smoke. I crept forward, keeping low to the ground, moving from shadow to shadow. Through the branches, I saw them.

Four orcs, sitting around a fire, laughing as they tore into a roasted boar.

Their weapons—rusted axes, crude swords, and a heavy iron hammer—were scattered nearby. The one who seemed like their leader, a scarred brute with a notched blade, grunted. "Good haul this time," he said in harsh, guttural common speech. "More wagons come soon. More gold. More meat."

I felt rage simmer beneath my skin. These weren't just random highwaymen. They were hunting the roads, preying on the weak. I took a deep breath, steadied my stance. It was four against one. But I'd fought worse odds. I unsheathed my sword, my heart pounding steady. It was time to cleanse this forest.

I moved slowly, my boots barely whispering against the leaf-strewn forest floor, my sword drawn, its steel glinting in the faint firelight. The orcs were relaxed, too confident, chewing loudly on their roasted boar, their voices a low growl of crude laughter and snarls.

Then—one of them spotted me.

A scarred brute, sitting closest to the fire, turned his beady yellow eyes toward the shadows. For a moment, he simply stared, then let out a guttural chuckle, nudging the orc beside him.

"Look at this," the brute rumbled, his voice thick with mockery. "A little dwarf creeping around our fire. What do you want, stone-rat?"

The others turned, their green-skinned faces curling into sneers.

I stepped forward, sword in hand, keeping my voice even, steady.

"You lot wouldn't happen to know anything about a wagon raid on the road, would you?"

The brute snorted, wiping grease from his chin. "Wagon raid? Nah, don't know nothing 'bout that."

Another orc, smaller but wiry, leaned on his crude spear. "Maybe you got the wrong grove, little man."

I narrowed my eyes, scanning their makeshift camp. Then—I saw it.

Near one of their filthy tents, half-hidden beneath a pile of rags and old leather, was a woman’s torn pants.

The air grew colder.

I slowly looked back at them.

"You sure about that?" I said, my voice low.

The scarred orc followed my gaze, then grinned, revealing yellowed, jagged teeth.

"Ain't none of your business who we rob, dwarf," he growled.

Another orc cracked his knuckles. "Ain't none of your business what we do after, neither."

That was it.

I tightened my grip on my sword and set my stance.

"Then I’ll make it my business."

The brute's grin widened. "Good. We was getting bored anyway."

He reached for his axe—and the fight exploded.

The first orc lunged, his axe swinging toward my ribs. I twisted aside, the blade whistling past me, and I slammed my sword into his side—steel met flesh, cutting deep through his leathery hide.

The orc bellowed in pain, staggering back, but I didn’t have time to finish him—the brute leader was already charging at me, a rusted shield raised high.

CRACK.

The shield smashed into my skull, ringing out like a temple bell.

Everything went black for a heartbeat—a void of pain and dizziness.

I stumbled back, my ears roaring, my vision swimming. I barely had time to regain focus before—

A brutal fist slammed into my stomach.

The air left my lungs.

I felt myself lifted off my feet, my body hurtling backward—until I crashed hard against a tree, bark snapping beneath me.

Pain spiked through my back, my vision flashing white.

The orcs laughed, closing in.

But pain?

Pain was familiar. Pain sharpened me.

I forced myself to move.

As the first orc came at me again, I rolled aside, swinging low—my blade bit deep into his leg.

CRACK—

His knee snapped with a sickening pop, and the orc howled, dropping his axe as he collapsed onto the dirt.

Another orc roared, bringing down a massive hammer—I barely dodged, feeling the wind of the swing rush past my ear.

I slammed my sword forward, piercing his arm, the blade driving through muscle and bone.

He shrieked, his grip loosening.

With a snarl, I yanked my sword free and hacked down again.

His hand flew off, severed cleanly at the wrist.

The orc screamed, clutching the bloody stump, staggering back in agony. Two down.

The brute leader growled in rage, gripping his shield and sword. "You'll die slow for that, dwarf." I spat blood onto the dirt. "Come try."

He charged, his shield raised high, aiming to slam me again. This time, I stepped forward instead of back.

At the last second, I ducked under his swing and drove my sword up—straight through his gut.

The brute coughed, his eyes going wide with shock.

I twisted the blade and ripped it free, a spray of dark orcish blood painting the ground.

He staggered, falling to his knees. I took a deep breath, raised my sword high— And brought it down, ending him.

The last orc, the one with the severed hand, was crawling away, moaning. I stepped toward him, my blade dripping with blood. His yellow eyes widened with fear. "Mercy!" he gasped. "Please!"

I looked at the torn clothing near the tent. At the scattered remains of stolen goods. At the burnt wagon I passed earlier. Then I drove my sword into his heart. There was no mercy for his kind.

I stood there, breathing hard, my sword dripping red, my body aching from the blows. The grove was silent now. Only the crackling of the fire remained, the air thick with the stench of blood and death. I wiped my blade clean, checking the camp.

The stolen goods, the signs of their cruelty, all of it was here. Borik would want to see this. I grabbed proof—a bloodstained satchel, some trinkets from the wagon's wreckage—and turned back toward the city.

The morning air was cold as I rode back toward Karad'Thul, my cloak stained with blood, my ribs aching from bruises. The orc bandits lay dead behind me, their fire smoldering into embers.

By the time I reached the Warrior's Guild, the place was already buzzing with activity—mercenaries training, blades clashing, and guild members preparing for new contracts.

I made my way straight to Borik Steelward's office, pushing through the heavy wooden doors.

He looked up from his ledger, eyeing me as I entered, blood still spattered across my armor and face.

"Back already?" he grunted. "Either you ran from a fight or you ended it fast."

I dropped an orcish pendant onto his desk, still slick with dried blood.

"Job's done," I said. "They won't be hunting our roads anymore."

Borik picked up the pendant, turning it in his fingers before nodding approvingly. "Good work," he muttered. "One less problem to deal with."

Then he leaned back in his stone chair, cracking his knuckles. "And speaking of problems," he said, "I've got another job for you, Gimil. One that needs a firm hand."

I raised an eyebrow. "Go on."

Borik pulled out a thick parchment, sealed with the Guild's sigil.

"This," he said, sliding it across the table, "is a contract signed a century ago. A debt owed to the Fighters' Guild by a Duergar merchant-lord, Vuthar Steelshade."

I frowned, picking up the parchment and reading over the details.

Vuthar Steelshade—a reclusive Duergar lord who operated out of Dûm'Zarak, the shadowed city deep underground.

His ancestors had borrowed a sum of gold from the Fighters' Guild to fund a mining expedition, promising repayment with interest.

But decades had passed, and Vuthar had yet to pay his due.

"So you want me to be a debt collector now?" I muttered.

Borik smiled. "More than that. We've sent letters, envoys, even messengers. He's ignored them all. It's time someone knocked on his door personally."

I folded my arms. "And if he refuses?"

Borik's expression darkened.

"Then you take what's owed—by force."

Armed with the contract, my sword, and the authority of the Guild, I set out the next morning toward the lower tunnels, where the light of Karad'Thul faded into the deep roads of the Duergar.

The path to Dûm'Zarak was long and treacherous, a winding descent through underground tunnels, where the air grew thick and the glow of moss and fungi lit the cavern walls.

As I approached the city gates, the first thing I saw was the looming obsidian towers, their sharp spires like spears piercing the cavern ceiling.

Dûm'Zarak was a fortress-city, built not with the warmth of Karad'Thul's stonework, but with jagged, imposing architecture, more fortified than welcoming.

Duergar soldiers in dark iron armor stood guard at the entrance, their beady eyes narrowing as I approached.

"Business?" one of them barked, gripping his war axe.

I held up the contract. "I've come to see Vuthar Steelshade. He has a debt to settle."

The guards exchanged glances.

Then one of them grunted. "Follow."

The guards led me through the shadowed streets of Dûm'Zarak, where hooded figures bartered in hushed tones, the forges spewed thick black smoke, and slaves toiled under the watchful eyes of overseers.

Vuthar's estate was a fortified stronghold, its gates adorned with engraved Duergar runes.

Inside, the merchant-lord sat upon a raised stone platform, flanked by bodyguards clad in blackened steel.

Vuthar Steelshade was older, his hair streaked with silver, but his eyes were as cold and cunning as any noble-born snake.

He smiled as I entered. "A dwarf from the surface, come to collect on a debt long forgotten?"

I tossed the contract onto the table before him.

"Not forgotten," I said. "Unpaid. And the Fighters' Guild doesn't forget what's owed."

Vuthar leaned back, stroking his beard. "And if I refuse?"

I smiled grimly. "Then you pay in blood."

Vuthar laughed, slow and mocking. "You surface dwarves always think money is power. But here, power is taken, not owed."

He snapped his fingers.

The two guards flanking him moved instantly, drawing curved blades, their armor clinking as they stepped forward.

I sighed, rolling my shoulders. "You could've just paid the damn gold."

Then they attacked.

The first one swung low, trying to cut my legs out, but I leapt back, parrying his attack with my short sword.

The second came in fast, smashing his shield into my ribs.

Pain flared through my side, but I didn't stumble—I countered, slamming my elbow into his throat, making him choke as I drove my blade into his gut.

He staggered, blood spilling onto the floor, but the first Duergar wasn't done.

He came in with a brutal overhead swing—I barely raised my shield in time, the force making my knees buckle.

Then I saw Vuthar reaching for a dagger.

The coward planned to stab me while his guards fought.

I snarled, pushing forward, knocking one guard off balance.

I whirled, grabbed Vuthar by his collar, and slammed his face into his own stone table.

CRACK.

Blood splattered from his broken nose.

"You bastard!" he howled, struggling, but I twisted his arm behind his back, slamming him onto the floor.

The remaining guard hesitated, seeing his master subdued.

I pressed the edge of my short sword against Vuthar's throat.

"Call off your dogs," I growled. "Or I take your head instead of your gold."

He panted, blood dripping from his nose, then finally nodded.

"Stand down," he rasped to his men.

The remaining guard lowered his blade.

I reached into Vuthar's chest of coin, grabbing the gold owed to the Guild, plus a little extra for the trouble.

Then I leaned close. "Next time, pay your debts before I have to remind you."

And with that, I left.

By the time I rode back into Karad'Thul, the gold was heavy in my saddlebags.

Borik grinned as I tossed the purse onto his desk.

"Seems like Vuthar saw reason after all," he said.

I smiled, wiping blood from my knuckles. "Aye. After some… persuasion."

I had barely set down my tankard of ale when the doors of the Warrior's Guild Hall burst open.

A thick silence fell over the mercenaries and fighters within. All eyes turned toward the intruder—a broad-shouldered dwarf, his hair streaked with grey, his beard unkempt, his armor dented and scarred from years in exile.

Umur Stonefist.

I recognized him instantly.

He had been one of Karad'Thul's finest warriors once—a fighter with unmatched skill, a name spoken with respect and admiration.

But dishonor had tainted his legacy.

Fifteen years ago, he had been banished for breaking his oath, for fleeing the battlefield when his comrades stood and fell.

And now he had returned.

His gravelly voice boomed across the guild hall.

"I, Umur Stonefist, once a warrior of Karad'Thul, return to claim my rightful place."

Murmurs swept through the gathered mercenaries, some spitting onto the ground, others muttering curses.

"A coward returns," someone hissed.

"Fifteen years in exile, and now he seeks his name again?" another scoffed.

But Umur stood unshaken. His fist clenched, his battle-worn eyes burning with resolve.

"I challenge the Fighter's Guild in single combat," he declared. "If I win, my honor is restored. My name cleared."

He turned his gaze directly to me.

"And I challenge Grandmaster Gimil to the duel."

Borik Steelward exhaled, rubbing his temple. "You don't have to accept this, Gimil," he muttered.

I set down my ale and stood. "Aye, I do."

I turned toward Umur, stepping forward, my boots heavy against the stone.

"Challenge accepted," I said.

The dueling pit was a deep circular ring, its walls lined with cheering fighters, the torches casting flickering shadows over the arena floor.

Borik stood at the edge of the pit, raising his voice.

"This is a duel of honor," he declared. "No death. First to yield or be unable to stand loses."

I rolled my shoulders, adjusting my grip on my short sword.

Umur smiled, drawing his warhammer.

"A fair fight, then," he muttered.

I nodded. "Aye."

Then the duel began.

Umur charged first, swinging his hammer in a brutal arc.

I barely dodged in time, feeling the air ripple past my cheek as the head of his weapon smashed into the dirt.

He was fast for his size.

I countered with a quick slash, but he raised his bracer, blocking the strike before twisting, ramming his shoulder into my chest.

The impact sent me stumbling back.

The crowd roared.

"Come now, Grandmaster," Umur smiled, circling me. "You fight like a stonemason, not a warrior."

I gritted my teeth.

I lunged forward, slashing low, aiming for his legs.

He blocked again, but this time, I followed up with a hard punch to his jaw.

His head snapped back, blood spraying from his lip.

He grunted, shaking it off, then came at me again.

This time, I wasn't fast enough.

His hammer crashed into my shield, the force rattling my bones, and before I could recover—

A second swing—straight to my ribs.

CRACK.

Pain exploded through my side as I was sent flying backward, crashing onto the stone floor.

The arena spun around me, my ears ringing, my breath coming short.

But I forced myself to stand.

Umur grinned, stepping forward. "Yield."

I spat blood onto the ground. "Not yet."

I rushed him this time, ducking under his hammer and slamming my shoulder into his ribs.

He staggered, and I struck low, sweeping his legs out from under him.

He hit the ground hard, his hammer clattering away.

I pressed my blade against his throat.

The crowd fell silent.

Borik stepped forward. "Yield, Umur," he said.

The renegade warrior panted, staring up at me.

Then, after a long moment, he nodded.

"I yield."

The crowd cheered, but I didn't raise my blade in triumph.

Instead, I stepped back, offering Umur a hand.

He stared at it for a long moment.

Then, slowly, he took it.

I pulled him to his feet.

Borik nodded, stepping forward. "The fight is finished. Gimil has defended the Guild's honor."

Umur turned to me, wiping blood from his mouth.

"You could have killed me," he muttered.

I shrugged. "You fought for honor, not greed. There was no need for bloodshed."

He smiled, shaking his head. "You've got a strong hand and a stronger heart."

He looked toward Borik.

"I may not be a member of the Guild again," Umur admitted, "but my axe is still sharp. If you ever need it… you have it."

A sworn ally.

I nodded. "I'll remember that."

Borik clapped his hands. "Now that the formalities are over—drinks, all around!"

The mercenaries roared in agreement, and soon, we were all back in the tavern, celebrating another day of battle, another victory won.

But as I sat with my ale in hand, I knew that the fights ahead would not always be so clean. And honor was not always so easily reclaimed.

The tavern roared with laughter and clanking tankards, the scent of roasted meats and spilled ale thick in the air.

Umur sat beside me, a fresh scar on his brow, a grin on his face, and a tankard of Mellow Tar ale in his hand.

Across from us, Borik Steelward leaned forward, his voice low and weighted, the glint in his eye telling me this wasn't just another night of drinking.

"You handled yourself well today, Gimil," he said, "but we've got bigger troubles ahead."

I took a long sip, wiping the foam from my beard. "What sort of troubles?"

Borik exhaled, setting down his tankard. "A war. A clan war. And if we don't stop it, Karad'Thul is going to bleed."

Borik leaned in, his voice quieter now, enough that only our table could hear.

"Clan Hammerfist and Clan Ironvein are at each other's throats. Two of the most powerful families in the city, and both claim the other has stolen from them."

I raised a brow. "Stolen what?"

"A gemstone-inlaid axe," Borik muttered. "The Axe of Durmorn, a relic from the old wars, supposedly forged by the first dwarves of Karad'Thul. Both clans held joint custody of it, as a symbol of their unity. But now? It's gone."

Umur grunted. "And they blame each other?"

"Aye," Borik said. "Hammerfist swears Ironvein took it. Ironvein swears Hammerfist has it. Neither will back down. And if no solution is found, they'll settle it the old way—through blood."

I sighed, rubbing my temple. "And we're meant to stop two stubborn, hot-headed clans from killing each other?"

Borik smiled. "Aye. And not just stop them. We need to solve this without making either side look weak. If we force one to admit guilt, the war might stop, but the grudge will last generations."

I took another sip of my ale, thinking.

"There's more to this," I muttered. "An axe doesn't just disappear. Someone's playing a game here."

Borik nodded. "And that's where you come in, Gimil. Find out who truly took the axe. If we uncover the real thief, we can end this before blood stains the stone."

I leaned back, considering.

"Alright," I said. "But I need to know everything—where it was last seen, who had access, any leads."

The next morning, I rode into the Clan District, where both Hammerfist and Ironvein had their halls.

The tension was thick in the streets—clan warriors standing at gates and doorsteps, hands resting on their weapons, eyes watching for any suspicious movement.

I met first with Thalrik Hammerfist, the head of his clan, a broad-shouldered, grey-bearded dwarf with the presence of a mountain.

"The Ironveins are liars," Thalrik spat. "They've coveted our wealth for generations. Now they steal our relic, and we're to stand idle?"

I raised a hand. "I just need the facts. When was the axe last seen?"

Thalrik grumbled. "Five nights ago. It was kept in the Great Hall's vault. No signs of forced entry."

"Meaning someone got in without breaking in," I muttered.

Next, I met with Baldric Ironvein, the other clan lord, whose demeanor was just as stubborn and prideful.

"Those Hammerfist bastards are scheming rats," Baldric growled. "We had nothing to do with this. They're using the theft as an excuse to undermine our power."

"The axe was in their vault, not ours," I pointed out. "How could your men steal it?"

Baldric hesitated. "That's for you to find out. But I tell you this—if they raise arms against us, we will not kneel."

The tension in Karad'Thul's Clan District was growing by the hour. As I moved between the estates of Clan Hammerfist and Clan Ironvein, I could feel the weight of suspicion pressing down on the city. Dwarves stood guard at their gates, their eyes filled with unspoken grudges, their hands resting on the hilts of their axes.

If I didn't find out who truly stole the Axe of Durmorn soon, blood would flow.

But I had a feeling in my gut—this wasn't just a clan feud. Someone was pulling the strings.

And so, I started digging.

I began at the Hammerfist vault, where the axe was last seen.

The room was cut from solid stone, the walls lined with iron-bound chests and ancient weapons, relics of battles fought centuries ago. The vault door was a massive slab of reinforced granite, the kind that should be impossible to open without a key.

The Hammerfist guards watched me warily as I examined the lock mechanism.

At first glance, it seemed untouched—but as I ran my fingers along the edges, I noticed something off. Thin, nearly invisible scratches around the keyhole. Not from a dwarf's key—but from lockpicking tools. A fine layer of blackened soot near the hinges—not from fire, but from a Duergar chemical compound used to weaken metal over time. A faint odor—acrid, metallic. Something familiar.

I stood, rubbing my chin. This wasn't the work of a drunken clan warrior looking for an excuse to stir trouble.

Someone skilled, someone with precision and patience, had gotten inside.

And Duergar alchemy had been involved.

After inspecting the vault, I spoke with the guards who had been on duty the night of the theft.

An older dwarf named Thrain Rockshield furrowed his brows, recalling something odd.

"There was a strange merchant wagon near the lower tunnels that night," he muttered. "Didn't recognize the crest. Thought it was some trader coming in late—but we never saw him leave."

"A merchant?" I frowned.

Thrain nodded. "Aye. Kept to himself, wore a hood. Smelled… off. Thought nothing of it. Next morning? The axe was gone."

That set my senses on edge.

A mystery merchant, arriving unannounced, leaving no trace? It reeked of a setup.

I knew where I had to go next—the underbelly of Karad'Thul, where coin spoke louder than law.

A narrow tunnel beneath the city, known as the Shrouded Market, was where smugglers, thieves, and outcasts traded secrets and stolen goods.

There, I found Brakka Greytusk, a known fence for stolen dwarven artifacts.

I dropped a coin pouch onto his counter, letting the silver spill out.

"Tell me about the merchant wagon that arrived the night the axe went missing."

Brakka eyed the silver, then exhaled. "Aye… I remember him. Didn't trade much—but he was looking for a way down to the deep roads."

I leaned forward. "Duergar?"

Brakka hesitated, then nodded. "Aye. But he didn't come alone. He had help—someone from within the city. Someone who knew how to get into that vault."

My stomach tightened.

This wasn’t just Duergar theft.

Someone from Karad’Thul had been in on it.

And I needed to find out who.

I pressed further, using my connections in the Guild to dig into recent movements in the city.

After a full day of asking the right questions, I finally got a name.

A dwarf named Jorvik Coalbrand—a lesser merchant, known for trading rare metals. He had recently taken an unusual trip to the lower tunnels.

Jorvik had no reason to be involved in such deep dealings. Unless he had been paid to help.

It was time to pay Jorvik a visit.

I found Jorvik in his storehouse, counting coins under the flickering light of an oil lamp.

He flinched when he saw me enter.

"Grandmaster Gimil," he stammered, quickly tucking away the silver. "What brings you here?"

I stepped closer, arms crossed. "The Axe of Durmorn was stolen. And I hear you’ve been doing business with some interesting people."

Jorvik’s face paled.

"I—I don’t know anything about that."

I slammed my hand onto the table, making coins jump into the air.

"Don’t lie to me, Jorvik," I growled. "I know about the Duergar merchant. I know he needed a way inside the vault. And I know you were paid to help him."

He swallowed hard, sweat forming on his brow.

"I—" he stammered, looking for a way out.

I grabbed his collar and pulled him close.

"Talk," I snarled. "Or I make sure you never trade again."

Jorvik trembled, then finally cracked.

"A Duergar named Vuthar Blackvein came to me," he admitted. "Said he needed access to Clan Hammerfist’s vault—that it was ‘for a greater cause.’"

"And you just let him in?" I barked.

"He paid a king’s ransom in gold!" Jorvik blurted. "Said it was a small job, no one would get hurt. But I—I didn’t know he meant to start a war."

I released him, shoving him back.

"You’re a fool," I spat. "And now you’re going to help fix this mess."

Jorvik nodded furiously. "Tell me where Vuthar took the axe," I ordered.

His hands shook as he pointed toward a hidden warehouse near the lower tunnels. "The axe is there," he stammered. "But… you won’t like what you find."

I stormed toward the lower tunnels, my fists clenched, my sword ready. If the Duergar had the axe, that meant one thing. They weren’t just stealing. They were engineering war.

And if I didn’t stop them soon, Karad’Thul would burn in the fires of its own hatred.

With Jorvik’s confession fresh in my mind, I moved swiftly through the lower tunnels, my boots striking against cold stone as I made my way toward the hidden warehouse where the Axe of Durmorn was supposedly being kept.

The air grew thicker, the torches on the walls fewer and dimmer, casting the tunnels in shifting shadows. This was no place for honest folk. It was a den for smugglers, spies, and those who wished to remain unseen.

And somewhere within, the Duergar had hidden the stolen axe, hoping to spark a war between Hammerfist and Ironvein.

I wouldn’t let them.

The warehouse loomed ahead—a low, reinforced stone structure, tucked against the edge of the deep-road tunnels leading further into the dark.

I crouched behind a crumbling pillar, watching.

There were two guards posted outside, clad in blackened chainmail, their faces obscured by thick helmets. Their stance was tense, hands gripping cruel, curved blades.

Duergar.

If they were stationed here, then the axe was inside.

But I needed a way in without raising the alarm.

I waited in the shadows, watching their patterns. When one of them turned away, I moved.

I crept toward the side entrance, keeping low and quiet, my blade drawn but unused.

The door was locked, but the frame was weak. I pressed my shoulder against the wood, gave a firm shove, and felt it give way just enough for me to slip inside.

The air was thick with the scent of oiled metal and damp stone. The only light came from flickering braziers, illuminating stacks of crates, barrels of black powder, and racks of stolen weapons.

And at the far end of the room—

The Axe of Durmorn, resting on a stone pedestal.

A gemstone-inlaid weapon, its mithril blade gleaming even in the dim torchlight, its handle wrapped in black leather, etched with runes of power.

But I wasn't alone. A voice rang out. "I was wondering when someone would come for it."

I turned sharply, blade raised. A figure stepped from the shadows, clad in black armor, his eyes gleaming red beneath his hood.

Vuthar Blackvein. The Duergar mastermind. He smiled, tilting his head. "Come to reclaim the axe, have you?" he mused. "How… predictable."

I kept my stance firm, sword ready.

"You stole it," I said. "You wanted the clans to tear each other apart."

Vuthar chuckled, pacing slowly around the room, his hands clasped behind his back.

"Oh," he sighed. "You surface dwarves… always so blinded by your own traditions." His smile widened. "Why should we waste our own armies fighting Karad'Thul when we can let your own kin destroy each other?"

Rage boiled in my chest. "You think this war will break Karad'Thul?" I growled. "It won't. It'll unite them—against you."

Vuthar's eyes darkened. "I can't allow that." He snapped his fingers.

The door behind me burst open. The two guards from outside stormed in, blades drawn. And the fight began.

The first Duergar guard lunged, his curved sword flashing toward my ribs. I twisted, bringing up my shield, catching the strike and countering with a brutal kick to his knee. He stumbled, but the second rushed in, swinging low.

I barely dodged, the blade slicing across my leather armor, leaving a burning gash along my side. I hissed in pain but pressed forward, slamming my shield into his face, sending him crashing into a stack of crates.

CRACK. Wood splintered, supplies spilled onto the floor.

The first guard recovered, charging again.

This time, I didn’t wait.

I pivoted, driving my sword up under his ribs, piercing through chainmail, feeling the hot rush of blood as he gasped, then fell still.

The second guard scrambled to his feet, but I met him mid-charge, bringing my blade down hard on his shoulder.

The mithril edge bit deep, severing muscle and bone.

He collapsed, groaning in agony.

That left only Vuthar.

Vuthar drew a long, black-bladed dagger, stepping forward calmly.

"You’re impressive," he said. "But you’re too late."

I narrowed my eyes. "What do you mean?"

He smiled. "War is already coming."

Then he attacked.

His blade moved fast—too fast. I barely had time to block, our weapons clashing in a shower of sparks.

We fought in the dim light of the warehouse, steel ringing as we traded blow for blow.

But Vuthar was no warrior.

He relied on speed, on trickery, on deception.

And I was stronger.

I feinted left, drawing him in—then drove my elbow into his jaw.

He staggered, and I followed with a brutal punch to his gut, sending him crashing onto the stone floor.

He coughed, blood dripping from his lips.

I planted my boot on his chest, pressing down just enough to keep him from moving.

"You lose," I muttered.

Vuthar laughed, despite the pain.

"Do I?" he whispered. "Even if I fall, Karad'Thul will crumble… you just don't know it yet."

I glared down at him.

"The clans won't fight each other," I said. "They'll fight you."

Then I raised the Axe of Durmorn, lifting it for the first time. A weapon meant to unite. And now, it would.

With the axe secured, I dragged Vuthar to his feet, binding his hands. It was time to return to Karad'Thul. To expose the truth. To end this war before it could begin. And to remind the Duergar that dwarves do not break. They endure.

The ride back to Karad'Thul was swift, my grip firm on the Axe of Durmorn, my thoughts racing as I planned my next move.

Vuthar Blackvein rode bound behind me, his wrists shackled in iron, his face bloodied from our fight.

The Duergar plot had been uncovered, but I knew that simply presenting the truth wouldn't be enough.

The Hammerfist and Ironvein clans were already at each other's throats—both looking for an excuse to spill blood.

If I didn't handle this right, I wouldn't just be delivering the axe.

I'd be walking into a battlefield.

By the time I reached the Clan District, the streets were thick with tension.

Hammerfist warriors in heavy armor had assembled outside their halls, gripping war axes and steel-tipped spears.

Across from them, Ironvein warriors stood in formation, their blackened helms reflecting torchlight, hands tight around the hilts of their blades.

At the center of it all, Thalrik Hammerfist and Baldric Ironvein stood, shouting accusations, their tempers burning hotter than forge fire.

"You thieving bastards!" Thalrik roared. "Return the axe now, or we'll carve it from your dead hands!"

Baldric sneered, stepping forward. "You can have it when you pry it from our corpses! You dare march on us with false accusations?"

Weapons were drawn, shields raised.

The first blow was only moments away.

That’s when I rode in.

I pulled hard on Stonehoof’s reins, bringing my horse between the two forces, raising the Axe of Durmorn high into the air.

"ENOUGH!" I bellowed.

The clang of metal ceased, all eyes snapping toward me.

"LOOK!" I shouted. "The axe is here!"

A wave of stunned silence swept through the crowd.

Both clan leaders turned, their eyes widening as they saw the gemstone-inlaid weapon gleaming in the torchlight.

"You both swore the other had stolen it," I said, my voice carrying across the courtyard. "But you were both wrong."

I reached behind me, grabbing Vuthar by the collar, yanking him off the saddle, and throwing him onto the stone pavement.

He hit the ground hard, grunting in pain as dozens of armored dwarves surrounded him, glaring.

"This Duergar filth stole it," I said, stepping forward. "It was never about clan pride or honor. It was about war. A war the Duergar wanted you to fight."

Thalrik Hammerfist strode forward, his face twisted in fury.

"You mean to tell me… this rat took our relic?"

Vuthar grinned through bloodied lips, chuckling softly.

"Aye," he muttered. "And it almost worked."

Baldric Ironvein narrowed his eyes. "Why? What did your people gain from this?"

Vuthar smiled. "What we’ve always wanted," he said. "To watch Karad’Thul burn. To watch you tear each other apart and leave your city weak, so we could take what we wished."

A murmur of anger spread through the crowd.

I turned, scanning the two clans, their warriors now united in outrage.

"This was never about a feud," I said. "You were both played. But now, you have a choice."

I stepped forward, driving the axe’s haft into the stone, letting it stand between them.

"You can still spill blood tonight," I said, my voice steady. "Or you can stand together and make them pay."

Thalrik looked at Baldric. Baldric looked at Thalrik.

Then, without a word, they both turned—

And drove their fists into Vuthar's face.

The Duergar crumpled, groaning, as the crowd cheered.

The Axe of Durmorn was returned to its rightful place.

But something had changed.

Clan Hammerfist and Clan Ironvein had been on the brink of tearing each other apart—but now, they stood side by side, their grudges dissolved in the face of a greater enemy.

In the days that followed, the Fighters' Guild, alongside the two clans, doubled city defenses and drove out any remaining Duergar spies.

Thalrik Hammerfist approached me, clasping my forearm in respect.

"You saved our people from a war we didn't need," he said. "For that, you have my loyalty."

Baldric Ironvein nodded. "And mine."

A united front. A city strengthened, not weakened.

And me?

I walked away richer, with a new custom-forged weapon in hand, and a favor owed by two of Karad'Thul's most powerful families.

Not bad for a single job.

Unexpected meeting

The Axe of Durmorn was returned, the clans at peace, and for the first time in weeks, Karad'Thul felt calm.

But my work never truly ended.

I stood in Borik Steelward's office, arms folded as he handed me a sealed parchment bearing the crest of the Fighters' Guild.

"A simple job, this time," he said. "Deliver this to the King's Guard. They've got a new recruit about to finish his trials, and they need to know when to expect him."

I took the message with a nod. "Aye. Anything else?"

Borik smiled. "Only that once you're done, you can take the rest of the day to yourself."

I raised a brow. "Rare thing, a mercenary getting free time."

"Don't get used to it," Borik muttered, turning back to his paperwork.

The King's Hall stood at the highest point of Karad'Thul, its massive stone walls built directly into the mountain, its gold-trimmed banners fluttering in the high cavern winds.

Guards in heavy plate armor, their shields engraved with the royal sigil, stood at the entrance, eyeing me as I approached.

I held up the sealed parchment.

"Message from the Warrior's Guild," I said.

One of the guards—a grizzled veteran with a deep scar across his cheek—took it, inspecting the seal and let me through. I entered the rooms of Kings Guard and presented the message to the overseer.

"New recruit, eh?" he muttered, nodding. "About time. The King's Guard needs more good steel."

He gestured toward the grand hall. "You're free to go."

I had no real purpose now, so I wandered through the massive corridors of the King's Hall, admiring the detailed stonework, the great carved pillars, the statues of old kings standing like silent watchers.

Then, as I turned a corner, I nearly bumped into someone.

"Ah! Gimil!"

I looked up—and there stood Isolde.

She was dressed in deep emerald robes, her auburn hair braided neatly, her eyes bright with recognition.

She smiled, tilting her head. "I should have guessed I'd run into you here."

I smiled. "What can I say? Stone calls to those who know it."

She chuckled. "And you know stone better than most."

Her gaze flickered to the statues lining the hall, her fingers brushing against the etched runes on one of the pillars.

"I was actually hoping to find you again," she admitted. "I've been thinking a lot about our last conversation—about bridges, about how stone remembers."

I leaned against the wall. "Aye?"

She nodded. "And I was wondering… if you'd be willing to take me for a walk through the city. Show me some of its marvels, the stories carved into its walls."

I raised a brow. "You want a tour?"

She smiled. "From a master builder like yourself? Absolutely."

The sun shone down through the natural skylights in the cavern ceiling, casting golden light over Karad'Thul as we stepped through the city streets.

I led Isolde through the old roads, pointing out architectural wonders that most dwarves walked past every day without a second thought.

I gestured to a massive stone relief carved into a towering wall near the Guild District.

"You see this?" I said, pointing to a set of interwoven sigils.

She studied them, tracing the curved lines with her fingers. "A clan crest?"

"Aye. But not just one." I tapped the central carving—a hammer striking an anvil, encircled by a winding serpent. "This marks the unity of three ancient dwarven houses. Long ago, they were bitter enemies, fighting over control of Karad'Thul. But this relief was carved when they forged peace. Now, their descendants live as one."

Isolde's eyes glimmered with interest. "That's beautiful," she murmured. "History written in stone."

I smiled. "Dwarves don't write history in books. We carve it so it can't be erased."

She laughed softly. "A good philosophy."

As we walked, I showed her more: A statue of an armored warrior, sword resting tip-down—a sign of victory and wisdom in battle. An old water fountain, shaped like a dwarf's open hands—a symbol of prosperity and generosity. A forgotten tunnel entrance, now sealed, once used by spies during the old wars.

Isolde was fascinated. She asked questions, listened intently, her curiosity unshaken.

At one point, she turned to me with a playful glint in her eye.

"You have a way of making stone seem almost… alive," she said.

I shrugged. "It is. It listens. It remembers. You just have to know what to look for."

She smiled, tilting her head. "And what does it say about you, Grandmaster?"

I chuckled, rubbing my beard. "That I work too much and drink too little."

She laughed, the sound light and warm.

As we continued walking, I felt the energy between us shift.

She walked a little closer, her shoulder brushing against mine.

Her tone softened, her voice more playful, and every so often, I caught her glancing at me when she thought I wasn't looking.

"So tell me, Gimil," she said after a while, "is there a hidden meaning to this moment? Or am I just imagining things?"

I smiled, meeting her gaze. "Stone doesn't lie, Isolde. And neither do I."

She smiled, and for a moment, we stood under the golden light, the city alive around us, yet feeling as though we were the only two people in it.

By the time we reached the central square, the day was waning, the city settling into the evening hum of taverns and markets closing.

Isolde sighed contentedly, looking around.

"This was… wonderful," she said. "I never realized how much life is carved into Karad'Thul's walls."

I chuckled. "Aye. It's all there, if you know where to look."

She turned to me, her expression soft, thoughtful. "Thank you for this, Gimil."

I nodded. "Anytime."

She hesitated for just a moment, then gently placed a hand on my arm.

"Maybe next time," she said, her voice quiet, "we can share a drink after the walk."

I let out a low chuckle. "It'd be rude to refuse."

She smiled. "Good. Next time, then."

With that, she gave me one last lingering look, then turned, disappearing into the crowds of the evening market.

I stood there for a moment, watching her go, before taking a deep breath of cool cavern air.

The day had started with a simple message delivery. But it had ended with something unexpected. Something worth remembering.

After a few days of well-earned rest, I found myself back at the Snoring Bear Tavern, enjoying the simple comforts of strong ale and warm food.

The days blurred together into a haze of smoked meats, dark dwarven brews, and sleep that stretched long and deep.

But peace never lasted long in Karad'Thul.

And soon enough, I was back at the Warriors' Guild, standing before Borik Steelward, waiting for my next task.

Borik tapped a thick roll of parchment against his palm, shaking his head.

"A few nights ago," he said, "a city guard patrol was sent to break up a disturbance near the lower quarters. A fight broke out, and they got beaten bloody."

I frowned. "A single man did this?"

"Aye. And not just any man," Borik said. "Name's Gorol. Big, strong, violent as a cave bear. He's been living with a woman in one of the old stone houses near the market. But the moment the guard tried to bring him in for questioning, he turned vicious. Broke three men's ribs, left another one coughing blood for hours."

I crossed my arms. "And why hasn't the city watch handled this themselves?"

"They tried. Now they're asking us to step in." Borik leaned forward. "Your job's simple—investigate the house. See what's down there in the cellar. Something about this doesn't sit right."

I nodded. "Aye. I'll take a look."

The house in question was an old stone dwelling, nestled in the shadows of Karad'Thul's winding streets.

It looked ordinary enough—nothing to suggest a man strong enough to beat trained guards senseless lived inside.

I knocked on the thick wooden door, my other hand resting near my sword hilt.

After a few moments, the door creaked open, revealing a nervous-looking dwarven woman with dark bruises along her arms and neck.

Her eyes darted around, like she was expecting trouble.

"You're not with the city watch, are you?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I'm with the Warriors' Guild. Here to ask about Gorol."

Her face paled. She stepped back, gripping the edge of the doorframe.

"He’s not here," she muttered. "Went out for the day. Please… just leave."

I narrowed my eyes. "The guards were attacked here. I need to look around. That includes the cellar."

She hesitated. Then, reluctantly, she stepped aside.

"I… I don’t know what’s down there," she whispered. "But he locks it every night. Won’t let me near it."

That was all the permission I needed.

I headed for the cellar door and descended the stone steps.

The air was damp and heavy, the scent of earth and something else—something foul—clinging to the walls.

Torches lined the chamber, illuminating old barrels and crates, but one thing stood out immediately—

A glass vial, filled with a dark crimson liquid, sitting atop a small wooden table.

I picked it up, rolling it between my fingers. Blood. My stomach twisted. Something about this wasn’t right. I turned just as the cellar door slammed open behind me.

Gorol stood at the top of the steps, his hulking frame blocking the dim torchlight.

His dark eyes locked onto the vial in my hand, and for the first time, I saw true fury twist his face.

"Put that down, dwarf," he growled staring at the vial, irritated.

I stepped forward. "What is this?"

He descended the stairs, slow and deliberate, his movements too controlled—too unnatural.

"Ain’t your business," he muttered.

His voice was deeper now, a strange rasp beneath the words.

I studied him closely. He looked like a normal man. But suddenly something felt off.

Then—his lips curled back, revealing sharp, elongated fangs. My blood ran cold. "Ah," I muttered. "That explains a lot." Gorol lunged.

I barely had time to raise my sword before he was on me.

His speed was unnatural, his strength monstrous.

I blocked his first strike, but his second hit me square in the chest, sending me flying backward into the stone wall.

Pain flared up my spine.

He was fast—too fast for a normal man. Half-vampire.

Gorol grinned, his fangs gleaming in the dim torchlight.

"You shouldn't have come here," he hissed.

I pushed myself up, raising my shield.

I kept my blade up, stepping carefully toward a trap door in the floor. The scent of rot and decay was stronger here. Gorol snarled, shifting to block me. "You don't want to open that."

I narrowed my eyes. "That means I absolutely should."

I grabbed the door and ripped it open. The stench of death filled the room instantly. It was a large wooden box. Inside— Half a dozen pale, motionless bodies, some still twitching weakly, their skin covered in bite marks, their veins drained.

Some were unconscious. Some were already gone. My stomach churned. "You sick bastard," I muttered, turning back to Gorol.

His face twisted into a feral snarl, and then he attacked again. His first punch slammed into my ribs, cracking at least one bone.

I gritted my teeth, driving my shield into his chest, forcing him back. But he didn't stagger like a normal man. He was relentless. He slashed at my throat with clawed fingers, barely missing.

I swung my blade at his side, but he caught it with his bare hand, his skin barely breaking.

Then, he drove his knee into my stomach, sending me sprawling onto the floor. The world spun. He loomed over me, laughing."You can't kill me, Grandmaster," he whispered. "I'll heal. I'll grow stronger. And when I'm done, I'll drink you dry."

I gritted my teeth. "Maybe." Then I grabbed a burning torch from the wall—and slammed it into his face.

Flames erupted across his skin. He screamed, staggering back, clawing at his burning flesh.I didn't hesitate. I lunged forward, driving my sword straight through his heart. His eyes widened in shock.Then, with a final guttural snarl, Gorol collapsed onto the stone floor, unmoving. I stood there, breathing heavily, blood dripping from my wounds.

The monster was dead.

And his victims were avenged.

I stood over Gorol’s lifeless body, exhaling slowly as I wiped my blade clean. The cellar was silent now, save for the occasional groans of the barely-alive victims in the storage chest.

I’d deal with them later—send for the city guard to recover them, give them a chance to live.

But for now, I climbed the stone steps back to the house above, stepping into the warm glow of lantern light.

The dwarven woman stood there, hands clutching the edge of the wooden table, her face pale and weary.

Her gaze darted to me, then to the blood on my armor.

"...Is he dead?" she asked, voice barely above a whisper.

I nodded. "Aye."

She exhaled, her shoulders sagging in relief.

She stepped forward, reaching into a small wooden box, pulling out a pouch of silver coins.

"Take this," she said, holding it out. "For—for what you did."

I glanced at the coins, then shook my head.

"Keep your silver," I said, smiling slightly. "Just—choose your men more carefully next time."

She gave a small, sad smile, nodding.

With that, I stepped out into the cool evening air, taking a deep breath of mountain wind.

It was time to find Isolde.

The King’s Hall was quiet when I arrived.

I knew exactly where to find her.

Sure enough, Isolde stood near one of the carved pillars, lost in thought, tracing a rune-etched design with her fingers.

She turned as she heard my footsteps, a warm smile crossing her lips.

"Gimil," she greeted, tilting her head. "Back so soon?"

I smiled. "Thought I’d see if you wanted to take a ride out to my village. A change of scenery. Fresh air. Maybe even some apple wine."

She raised a brow. "You made wine?"

"Aye," I said. "And I need someone to tell me if it’s any good."

Isolde chuckled. "You know, that might be the best offer I’ve heard all day."

The ride to the village was peaceful—just the sound of Stonehoof’s hooves on the dirt road, the gentle hum of the wind through the fields.

By the time we arrived, the sun had begun to set, casting long golden light over the mountains.

Isolde climbed down from the horse, stretching slightly as she looked around.

"You live here?" she asked, glancing at my stone cottage.

I nodded. "Aye. Simple. Sturdy. Mine."

She smiled. "I like it. It suits you."

I led her around the garden, showing her the rows of plants, the fruit trees, the hemp I grew for my pipe.

"This is where the apple wine comes from," I said, plucking an apple from the tree and tossing it to her.

She caught it with a laugh. "A dwarf who fights, builds, and grows his own fruit? That’s rare."

I smiled. "I like to keep busy." Inside, we settled into wooden chairs, a bottle of the golden apple wine between us.

I poured two mugs full, handing her one. She took a careful sip, then raised her brows in surprise. "This is… actually quite good."

I grinned. "Aye? Good to know I won’t poison myself with it."

The night wore on, the bottle emptied, and the laughter grew easier. She leaned in a little closer, her eyes softer, her smile playful.

"So, Grandmaster," she said, twirling her mug between her fingers, "do you always invite noblewomen to your cottage, or am I just lucky?"

I chuckled, setting my mug down. "Only the ones who appreciate good stonework."

She laughed. "And bridges, don’t forget bridges."

Then, before I knew it, she had moved even closer, her fingers lightly tracing the edge of my hand.

"You’ve been looking at me all night," she murmured.

I smiled. "So have you."

Then I leaned in—and kissed her. And she didn’t stop me

. What started as a slow kiss quickly turned into something more.

We moved to the bed, clothes cast aside, the warmth of apple wine and firelight filling the room.

She was soft, but fierce—someone who took what she wanted and didn’t hold back.

And neither did I.

The night stretched long, bodies twisting beneath furs and blankets, the sound of whispered words and laughter filling the cottage.

Later, as we lay in the warm glow of the hearth, I noticed her expression shift.

She traced absent circles along my chest, staring into the flickering light.

"Something on your mind?" I asked.

She hesitated, then sighed.

"My father has… arranged a marriage for me," she admitted.

I blinked, the warmth of the moment cooling slightly.

"To who?"

"Some clan lord's son," she muttered. "An alliance marriage—nothing about love, just politics. I barely know him."

I studied her. "And you don’t want it?"

She shook her head. "Not in the slightest. But that doesn’t matter. Duty comes first."

I sighed, running a hand through my hair.

Forced marriages were common among dwarven nobility.

It didn’t mean they were right.

"You thinking of running?" I asked, half-joking.

She laughed, but there was sadness in it.

"If only it were that easy."

I exhaled, then poured another round of apple wine.

"Well," I muttered, handing her a mug, "for tonight, let’s drink to things that make sense."

She smiled, clinking her mug to mine. "To that."

We drank, we talked, and when the night grew late, I saddled Stonehoof and took her back to the city.

By the time I rode back to the village, the sky was dark, the stars glittering through the cavern ceiling.

I left Stonehoof in the stable, stretched, and made my way to the Snoring Bear Tavern.

I found my usual corner, ordered a mug of ale, and leaned back against the wooden beams.

The night had been… unexpected.

And Isolde?

She was starting to become something more than just a passing moment.

I wasn’t sure where this was heading.

But for now, I let myself enjoy the ale, the warmth of the fire, and the memory of her touch lingering on my skin.

The morning came too soon, the warmth of my tavern cot barely enough to push away the exhaustion from the past few days. But rest would have to wait.

Into the dark

I stepped into the Warriors’ Guild, expecting the usual routine—training, job postings, the occasional sparring match.

Instead, I barely made it through the guild doors before Borik Steelward stormed toward me, his face grim, his usual composure strained.

"Gimil," he called, his tone urgent. "We’ve got bad news."

I crossed my arms. "What happened?"

"There’s been a collapse at the mines," he said, voice tight. "And it’s worse than just some fallen rock."

I frowned. "How bad?"

Borik exhaled. "Bad enough. Seven miners dead, 2 missing. But that's not all. Something came through the tunnels."

I tensed. "Something?"

"Goblins," he muttered. "Crawling in from a breached tunnel. And if they found a new passage, that means more of the filthy rats will be coming soon."

I turned, striding toward the guild courtyard, where fighters were practicing with axes and blades, preparing for their daily tasks.

Then, I spotted a familiar face.

Umur Stonefist.

The once-exiled warrior had been sticking around the guild lately, proving himself in fights, working odd jobs.

And today, I needed an extra sword.

I stepped toward him. "Umur."

He turned, raising a brow. "Gimil?"

I smiled. "You told me you'd offer your sword when needed. I'm calling that favor now."

His eyes lit up with battle hunger. "Good," he muttered, cracking his knuckles. "I was getting bored."

He moved toward the weapon racks, strapping on a heavy steel cuirass, a thick iron helmet, and a double-bladed axe as tall as his shoulder.

He grinned. "Ready for some blood."

Borik, Umur, and I mounted our horses, setting off toward the mines at full gallop.

The mountain wind bit at my face, the cold air thick with tension.

By the time we reached the mine entrance, dwarven overseers were arguing with city guards, their faces lined with worry.

The tunnel wall was partially collapsed, the scent of dust and sweat thick in the air.

I dismounted, stepping forward, my trained eye already analyzing the damage.

As a mason, I'd seen dozens of cave-ins before. But this one…

I knelt near the fallen stone, running my fingers over the rubble, studying the breaks.

"A miner dug too close to the supporting pillar," I muttered. "That's what did it."

Borik frowned. "Careless mistake."

I nodded. "Aye. And it cost seven lives."

Umur grunted, gripping his axe. "Let’s make sure it doesn’t cost more."

I turned toward the darkened tunnel.

"Torches out," I ordered. "Time to see what’s down there."

We moved deeper into the mine, the only light the flickering glow of our torches.

The air was damp, stale, the smell of earth, old sweat, and something… fouler.

Goblins were filthy creatures, known for leaving rot wherever they crawled.

But as we walked… We found nothing.

No corpses. No remains of miners. No weapons or signs of battle. Just silence. Then— A soft chittering.

I barely had time to turn my head before something large and fast dropped from the ceiling above. A spider.

The size of a fully grown wolf, its legs thick as spears, its black carapace gleaming in the torchlight.

It landed directly on Borik, knocking him to the ground. Before I could move, another one lunged at me. I dove sideways, barely dodging its dripping fangs, rolling across the rocky ground as it clawed at me. Umur let out a battle cry, swinging his massive axe, severing one of the spider’s legs clean off.

It shrieked, skittering backward, but before it could retreat, he buried the blade deep into its head. It twitched, then collapsed, lifeless.

I turned to help Borik— But the second spider had already wrapped him in silk. His arms and legs were pinned, his face barely visible as thick webbing coiled around him. Then—its fangs sank into his skull.

Borik let out a muffled yell, his body jerking violently. I lunged forward, hacking at the webbing, freeing his right arm. "Hold still!" I barked.

Borik gritted his teeth, his skin already paling from the venom.

The spider reared up, ready to strike again— But I drove my blade deep into its mouth, feeling the steel slide through its brain. It let out a horrid screech, its legs curling inward as it spasmed—then fell still.

I knelt beside Borik, gripping his arm. "You still with me?" I asked. He nodded weakly, sweat forming on his brow. "Poison's in me," he muttered. "Feels like my bones are turning to dust."

I reached into my belt pouch, pulling out a vial of dwarven fire-whiskey.

"Drink," I said.

He snatched the flask, gulping it down, coughing slightly.

His breathing evened out, but he was weaker now.

"Can you walk?" I asked. He nodded slowly. "Aye… but not fast."

Umur stepped forward, gripping his axe tightly. "If goblins are in these tunnels, we need to find them before they find us."

I nodded. "Aye. And that means going deeper." With Borik leaning slightly on his axe, we pushed further into the tunnels, the darkness ahead stretching on endlessly. Whatever lay ahead, we had no choice but to face it.

The tunnels stretched endlessly ahead, winding deeper into the mountain, the air growing colder, and fouler with every step.

We pressed on, torches flickering against the damp stone, each of us knowing that the missing miners were still out there—if they were even alive.

The walls closed in, the tunnels narrowing. The deeper we went, the more signs of goblin presence emerged—scattered bones, rusted weapons, scraps of cloth soaked in filth.

And then, we found it.

A lair of bones.

The floor was littered with skulls, shattered ribs, and broken weapons. A stench so foul it burned my throat filled the cavern.

And at the center of the room, sitting on a pile of gnawed bones, was a fat goblin.

The goblin chieftain, if I had to guess. Rotund, covered in filth, his warty skin stretched tight over rolls of fat. He was gnawing on a bone, his yellow teeth crunching through marrow, completely unaware of our presence.

Umur nudged me, whispering. "Let's take this quietly."

I raised a brow. "Since when do you care for quiet?"

He grinned, stepping forward.

With painstaking caution, Umur crept behind the goblin, raising a fist the size of a hammer.

Then—he struck. A heavy THWACK echoed through the chamber.

The goblin barely reacted. It blinked once, then continued chewing.

Umur frowned, lifting both fists, and began raining down blow after blow on the goblin's thick skull.

THUD. THUD. THUD.

The goblin just sat there, blinking in mild confusion, chewing slowly as if nothing was happening.

I snorted, trying not to laugh.

Borik, despite his weakened state, coughed out a low chuckle.

Umur growled, shaking his aching fists.

"The hell is wrong with this thing?" he muttered.

The goblin finally stopped chewing, setting down its half-eaten bone.

Then it slowly turned its head toward Umur.

For a second, there was silence.

Then—

"RRRIIIIIIIIIIIHHHHH!!!"

The goblin let out a piercing, earsplitting screech, its mouth stretching wide in an unnatural howl.

The sound rippled through the tunnels, bouncing off the stone walls.

Then—from the shadows—came the response.

The ground trembled.

From the tunnels ahead and behind, **goblins poured into the lair—**thin, feral, shrieking.

There were at least fifteen of the filthy little bastards, each armed with rusty blades, crude axes, and sharpened bones.

The room erupted into chaos.

I barely had time to raise my shield before one of them lunged at my leg, sinking its teeth into my calf.

Pain flared up my leg, and I roared, grabbing the goblin by the head and yanking it off me.

Its fangs ripped flesh, but before it could screech again, I wrenched its head clean off its body, tossing it aside.

Blood splattered across the floor.

To my left, Umur was swinging his massive axe, cutting through goblins like a butcher at work.

One jumped on his back, wrapping thin arms around his neck.

Before he could throw it off, another one stomped on his head, sending him crashing into the pile of bones.

A sickening CRACK echoed through the chamber—his rib breaking.

"BASTARDS!" Umur bellowed, shoving them both off with raw strength, his axe carving through one's skull.

Another rushed him, slashing at his exposed side.

I stepped in, driving my sword through its gut, twisting the blade before kicking the lifeless corpse away.

"Watch yourself!" I barked.

"Didn't expect the bastards to fight dirty!" he grunted, wiping blood from his face.

Borik, still weakened from the spider's venom, fought with grim determination.

He moved slower, his shield arm trembling, but he still cut down three goblins, one after the other.

But then—

One of the goblins leaped onto his back, clawing at his face.

Borik stumbled, falling to one knee, panting hard.

A second goblin raised a jagged blade, preparing to drive it into his back.

I turned, throwing my dagger mid-step.

The blade buried itself into the goblin's throat, and it collapsed in a gurgling mess.

I rushed to Borik's side, swinging my sword in a wide arc, forcing the goblins back for a moment.

"You still with us?" I asked.

He coughed, wiping blood from his mouth. "Aye," he muttered. "Just need to kill a few more."

The battle became a blur of steel and screams. Goblins jumped from the walls, their claws raking through armor. Swords clashed, and the floor ran red with their blood.

Umur headbutted a goblin so hard its skull collapsed. I took a knife to the arm but drove my sword straight through a goblin's heart before it could run. Borik, bloodied but standing, shattered a goblin's ribs with his shield, sending the broken creature tumbling.

The fat goblin chieftain, the one who had sounded the alarm, was crawling away, trying to escape.

Umur saw him. With a savage roar, he hurled his axe. The blade spun through the air—then buried itself deep into the goblin's back.

The chieftain gurgled once—then slumped over, dead. The chamber was silent now, save for the ragged breathing of three battle-worn warriors.

The goblins were dead, their bodies littering the ground, their blood soaking the stone floor. I pulled my sword free from a corpse, wiping the blade on a torn cloak.

Umur winced, clutching his ribs. "Think one of the little bastards cracked me good."

Borik, barely standing, exhaled. "They fought like cornered rats." I nodded. "And yet, something feels off." I glanced toward the deep tunnels ahead, the ones the goblins had come from. Something about them… felt wrong. I stepped forward, staring into the black abyss.

"We're not done," I muttered.

We pressed on, leaving the blood-soaked goblin lair behind, our boots crunching over broken bones and rusted weapons.

The two missing miners were still out there.

And they weren't with the goblins.

That meant only one thing—they were deeper in these cursed tunnels.

The air grew colder the further we descended.

The warmth of the upper mines faded, replaced by an icy stillness, the kind that clung to stone untouched by the sun for centuries.

I could feel it in my bones—we were getting close to something old.

The tunnel walls shifted, changing from the rough-hewn stone of dwarven mining picks to something more… deliberate.

Carved.

The edges of the passage smoothed out, shaped by hands that knew stone well.

Then, as we turned a bend, we saw it.

Duergar tunneling.

The walls were different here, sculpted with clean lines and reinforced arches, the unmistakable hallmarks of Duergar craftsmanship.

Their fortified passageways cut through the mountain, extending their hidden empire deeper beneath Karad'Thul's reach.

I narrowed my eyes. We had to pass through here. There was no other way down.

We continued forward, but we didn't get far.

A little deeper in, four Duergar warriors stood waiting, clad in dark iron armor, their eyes gleaming with malice.

One of them—a thick-necked brute with a scar down his forehead—stepped forward, gripping the hilt of his war axe.

"You don't belong here, surface rats," he sneered, his voice thick with contempt.

I exhaled, already feeling my blood rise.

"We're looking for two of our miners," I said, keeping my tone level but firm. "They disappeared after a cave-in."

The Duergar laughed, his voice echoing off the stone walls.

"Maybe they got lost. Maybe they're dead."

A second Duergar, younger but just as arrogant, smiled. "Better off that way. One less dwarf digging into our stone."

I clenched my fists.

"We're passing through," I said, stepping forward. "We don't need your permission."

The Duergar didn't move.

Instead, their leader spat onto the ground, grinning.

"We don't give a damn about your miners. Turn back, or we'll make sure you join them."

Umur scoffed. "You're standing in our way, Greybeard."

The Duergar's grin widened. "And what if we are?"

"You'll be pissing blood before the hour's out," Umur growled.

The air grew thick with tension, the insults sharper, heavier.

I knew how this would end.

And sure enough— The Duergar leader suddenly lunged, swinging his war axe straight for my head. I barely had time to raise my shield. The fight had begun.

The clash of steel rang out as we met the Duergar head-on.

The tunnel was narrow, forcing us into brutal, close-quarters combat.

Borik moved slower, his body still weak from the spider's venom, but he fought hard, parrying a Duergar's blade with his shield before shoving the enemy back.

I turned, blocking a side strike, but before I could counter—

CRACK.

A Duergar shield slammed into my face.

Pain exploded in my skull, my nose breaking with a sickening crunch.

I staggered, blood pouring from my nostrils, my vision blurring for a moment.

The Duergar laughed.

"Not so tough now, are you?"

I wiped the blood from my mouth, shaking off the pain.

"You hit like a wet-bearded bastard."

Then I drove my sword straight into his gut.

He gurgled, his smile twisting into a look of horror.

I ripped the blade free, and he collapsed.

To my left, Umur was locked in a vicious brawl.

Two Duergar were on him at once, smashing at his defenses with ruthless force.

One leaped onto his back, wrapping an arm around his throat while the other drove his knee into Umur's ribs. CRACK.

Umur let out a pained roar, staggering as he felt the bone break.

But even injured, he was still a monster.

With sheer brute strength, he grabbed the Duergar clinging to him, lifted him off the ground —and slammed him headfirst into the stone wall.

The Duergar went limp, his skull cracked like an eggshell.

Umur turned to the other, panting.

"You've got one chance to run," he growled.

The Duergar hesitated—then tried to flee.

Bad choice.

Umur swung his axe in a wide arc, the blade cleaving through the back of his skull.

Borik was struggling, his movements slower, his breathing ragged.

I saw him stumble, his body swaying—then, suddenly, he collapsed against the wall.

"BORIK!" I roared, slashing at the last Duergar, pushing him back with desperate swings.

Borik wasn't dead, but he was out cold.

The poison, the exhaustion—it had finally taken its toll.

I had no time to help him. The last Duergar warrior came at me, his eyes burning with hatred. I met his charge head-on. We clashed violently, the sound of metal-on-metal filling the tunnel. He swung wildly, trying to overpower me.

I let him. I let him think I was losing ground.

Then, when he overcommitted— I stepped inside his guard, driving my shield into his chest, forcing him back. Before he could recover, I swung my blade up— And took his head clean off.

The fight was over. The tunnels were silent once more, save for our heavy breathing. I wiped blood from my nose, exhaling. Umur stood grimacing, holding his side. "Ribs are broken," he muttered. "But I'll manage."

I knelt beside Borik, shaking him slightly. His eyes fluttered open, weak but alive. "You with us?" I asked.

He nodded slowly. "For now," he croaked. "Let's… keep moving." I looked toward the darkened tunnels ahead. We were getting closer. And something told me the missing miners weren't far now.

"On your feet," I muttered, gripping my sword tighter. The real danger still lay ahead. And we were going to find it.

The darkness deepened as we moved further down the winding tunnels, the air colder, the scent of metal, oil, and damp stone filling our lungs.

We had dealt with goblins. We had fought Duergar warriors. But now, as we stepped through a narrow archway carved with ancient runes, we entered something different. Something unnatural.

We emerged into a massive cavern, larger than any of the previous tunnels.

Stone chambers lined the walls, their doors reinforced with metal, their interiors stacked with crates, barrels, and scattered tools.

But what caught my eye—what made my stomach tighten with unease—were the machines.

Dozens of turned-off automatons sat silent and motionless, their metal limbs curled inward like dead spiders.

Their bodies were forged from blackened steel, engraved with complex runes, their joints reinforced with dark brass.

Some were small, designed for delicate mechanical tasks.

Others were hulking, their arms crafted into hammers, drills, and saws meant for cutting through solid rock.

A line of rusted mining carts stood abandoned, some still half-filled with ore, the remains of an old mining operation.

Tools lay scattered—hammers, wrenches, forge clamps, discarded metal plates, and spare gears—everything needed for machine maintenance.

The Duergar's secret weapons.

As we pressed on, the tunnels widened, leading into an open mining system.

The walls stretched high, disappearing into the gloom of the underground, lit only by dim braziers casting flickering light.

This wasn't just a mine.

It was an industrial system, something far more organized and advanced than anything I had seen from the Duergar before.

Automaton machines were hard at work. Large mining constructs stood against the walls, drilling through solid rock, their arms grinding away at the stone, sending shards and dust cascading into iron carts. Smaller automatons scurried along tracks, pushing carts overflowing with ore toward a processing station, where Duergar overseers sorted through the metals. Massive furnaces glowed faintly in the distance, their flames flickering behind iron grates, their purpose unclear but likely for melting raw ore into usable ingots.

I had heard rumors of Duergar automatons—machines capable of digging, mining, and even fighting. But seeing them up close was another thing entirely.

I could recognize some of the mechanical details—the way the pistons were reinforced, the placement of gears to minimize wear, the strange tubing that likely carried some form of magical energy.

These weren't just machines. They were masterworks. And their construction was a well-kept secret.

I glanced at Borik and Umur. They were staring too, taking in the sight. But we had no time to dwell. The missing miners were still deeper inside. And if we alerted the Duergar now, we might never find them alive.

We moved carefully, staying low, creeping behind crates and mining carts as Duergar overseers barked orders at their workers.

The miners were too busy loading ore into carts to notice us, their faces grim, their hands blackened with soot and metal dust.

A few automatons lumbered past, their mechanical limbs grinding softly, the gears whirring in quiet harmony.

I barely breathed, my muscles tense with every step.

One wrong move, and we'd have the entire mine on our heads.

We made it past the main cavern, reaching a smaller tunnel at the far end.

But just as we were about to enter, something blocked our way.

Standing at the tunnel's mouth was a patrolling Duergar construct—a metal sentinel, its head a dome of steel, its arms fitted with long, bladed extensions.

It moved in a precise, rhythmic pattern, its core pulsing with a faint purple glow.

It wasn't just a worker machine.

This thing was a guard.

And there was no way past it without being seen.

I clenched my jaw, looking for another way through.

But then— Borik, still pale and weak from the poison, grinned. "I have an idea," he muttered.

We all looked at him. "When the machine turns around, I'll get close," he said. "And I'll pull out its power crystal." I frowned. "That's… risky as hell."

Borik smiled, rolling his shoulders. "Aye. But if it works, it'll be worth it."

I sighed, gripping my sword. "Fine. But if it sees you, we're all dead."

Borik just grinned wider. "Then let's hope it doesn't see me." We waited.

The automaton shifted, its glowing eyes scanning the tunnel, its blade-arms twitching slightly.

Then, after a few seconds, it turned away, moving along its patrol path.

Borik moved. His steps were silent, his breathing steady, his movements quick and precise. He reached the back of the machine, his fingers brushing against the glowing core embedded in its spine.

He gripped the crystal—and yanked. ZZZZTTTCHKK.

A violent surge of energy rippled through the air, the automaton shuddering violently, its limbs locking in place.

For a brief, terrifying second, I thought the damn thing would explode—

But then it whined softly, its glowing core fading to black. It staggered once, then collapsed onto its knees, lifeless. We froze. The Duergar in the mine didn't react.

Nobody had noticed. Borik turned back to us, grinning as he held up the crystal. "Simple," he muttered.

I shook my head, exhaling. "Mad bastard." But it worked. And now, we were clear to move deeper. We stepped past the fallen machine, into the blackened tunnels beyond.

No more mine carts. No more machinery. Only cold stone, twisting tunnels, and an unsettling silence. The missing miners were somewhere in the depths ahead.

The tunnels had become silent, too silent. The further we pressed, the more I felt something shifting in the air—a thickness, a weight pressing against my chest like a buried heartbeat within the stone.

The walls grew slick, the rock damp with moisture, yet the air was cold, biting through our armor.

Borik, still weak from the spider poison, gritted his teeth, his knuckles white around his axe.

"I don't like this," he muttered. "This isn't just a mining tunnel anymore."

I nodded. "Aye. Something's—"

A sound.

A wet, dragging noise.

I raised my torch, my stomach turning as the flickering firelight illuminated something ahead.

A pile of discarded husks—moist, glistening, twitching as if still alive.

Thin, shredded layers of what looked like flesh hung from the walls like curtains, pulsing softly as if they were breathing.

And then—a whisper.

Not words. Not language.

Just a dry, raspy exhale.

Then another.

Then another.

Then—

They attacked.

The darkness twisted, and they came crawling.

Seven of them, emaciated, towering humanoids, their bones stretching against paper-thin skin, their veins pulsing beneath the surface like writhing worms.

Their jaws unhinged, splitting down to their chests, revealing rows upon rows of needle-thin teeth.

Their milky, pupil-less eyes locked onto us, and even though they never blinked, I could feel them watching.

One of them raised its spiked fingers, dragging them against the stone—

SKREEEETCH.

A sound that made my teeth ache.

Another reached to its own stomach, its fingers tearing through its skin, shedding it like a wet, shivering husk.

Beneath, raw, glistening muscle quivered, steaming in the cold air.

And worse—

It was wearing a flayed human face like a cloak.

A miner's face.

I barely had time to register the horror before they rushed us.

The first Veilskinner lunged at me, its jaw stretching open too wide, a low, gurgling screech tearing through the tunnel.

I barely got my shield up before it clamped down, teeth sinking into the steel, piercing straight through it.

The force of its bite sent me staggering, my arm jolting with pain.

To my left, Umur swung his axe, cleaving through one of the creatures' arms.

But instead of screaming, it just turned its head slowly, tilting its eyeless face toward him, grinning wider.

Then, another lunged at him, its clawed fingers digging into his side.

CRACK.

I heard the bone snap.

Umur roared in pain, but he didn’t fall.

Instead, he grabbed the Veilskinner by the head and slammed it into the tunnel wall, cracking its skull like rotten fruit.

Borik, still struggling from his weakened state, swung his war hammer, catching another Veilskinner in the ribs, caving in its emaciated chest.

But they didn’t stop.

Even as they fell, their muscles twitched, their flesh shifting as if trying to reform.

One lunged at me again, this time slashing downward with its elongated bone fingers.

I ducked, rolling under its attack, then drove my sword upward, slicing through its gut.

Its insides spilled out, but instead of guts, a thick, black ichor poured forth, writhing as if it was alive.

I had no time to process it.

Because something worse was coming.

I heard it before I saw it. A wet, chittering noise. Like flesh being chewed, sucked, torn apart. Then— They poured from the cracks in the walls, a crawling, writhing wave of horrors.

Mawbrood.

They were small, each no larger than a fist, but they moved together, their rubbery bodies pulsing, their lamprey-like mouths gnashing and twisting in an endless hunger.

A living tide of teeth and tendrils.

The first one latched onto my leg, its jaws piercing straight through armor, slicing into flesh.

I yelled, trying to shake it off, but two more leaped onto my arm, their mouths tearing through leather and steel.

They were everywhere. I saw one digging into Borik's shoulder, its mouth burrowing into his flesh as he screamed in agony.

Umur swung his axe wildly, cutting through a cluster of them, but more crawled onto his back, clamping onto his skin. I grabbed one from my arm, crushing it beneath my gauntlet, but the others kept coming.

They didn't stop. They didn't feel pain. And they were trying to strip us to the bone.

"FIRE!" I roared. "BURN THEM!"

Borik, despite his weakened state, fumbled for his torch, swinging it wildly.

The moment it touched the Mawbrood, they screamed, their rubbery skin bubbling, their bodies twitching violently before curling into ash.

Umur grabbed one, biting down on it with his own teeth in sheer rage, then spat it onto the ground, stomping it into the dirt.

I pulled a flask from my belt—fire oil.

I smashed it against the ground, sending flames surging across the tunnel floor.

The Mawbrood screeched, retreating from the heat, their flesh searing and blackening.

I turned, slashing one last Veilskinner across its unhinged jaw, severing half its head.

It staggered, still twitching, still trying to reform.

So I grabbed a burning piece of cloth from Borik's torch—

And shoved it into the creature's gaping mouth.

It convulsed violently, then collapsed, its body spasming before finally falling still.

The cave was silent again. The corpses of the Veilskinners twitched for a moment, then stopped. The Mawbrood swarm had been burned, crushed, and hacked to pieces.

We stood there, panting, bloodied, barely able to catch our breath.Umur wiped his face, his beard soaked in sweat and gore. "WHAT. THE. FUCK. WERE THOSE?" he wheezed.

I spat blood onto the ground, gripping my wounded arm. "I don't know," I muttered.

The tunnels still reeked of blood and burnt flesh, but we pressed on. One miner was still missing.

Dorin Ironpaw.

A tough bastard, but he was alone down here, and after everything we'd fought already, I wasn't sure if he'd be alive, dead… or worse.

As we moved deeper, the air changed again.

The cold, damp stillness of the Veilskinner lair gave way to something else entirely.

A pungent, gut-churning stench filled the tunnels ahead—like wet fur, rotting meat, and something that smelled like a week-old stew gone wrong.

I shot Umur a glance. He sniffed, then made a disgusted face.

"That's troll stink," he muttered, gripping his ribs. "I'd know it anywhere."

Borik grunted. "Great. As if the skin-peeling horrors and flesh-eating worms weren't enough."

I sighed, rubbing my temples. "Let's find the damn miner before the troll does. Or worse—before we find what's left of him."

We pushed forward.

The tunnel opened into a massive, moss-covered cavern, filled with scattered bones, broken crates, and a few unfortunate mining tools that had clearly been stolen.

A makeshift nest of straw and rocks sat in one corner, next to a bubbling pot of something brown, thick, and deeply questionable.

And in the center of it all, sitting cross-legged like a great, lumpy statue of stupidity, was the stone troll.

A massive, green-skinned brute, its belly sagging over its legs, its drool hanging from a thick lower lip, pooling into its own massive hands.

And next to it— Dorin Ironpaw.

A burly dwarf, still miraculously alive, but looking like he'd been through hell.

His clothes were filthy, his beard was a wreck, and he was currently being patted on the head like a dog.

I blinked.

The troll grinned, its crooked, tusk-like teeth glistening with saliva.

"TINY HAIRY FRIEND!" it bellowed in a thick, slobbering voice.

Dorin stared at the wall, eyes dead inside. "Kill me," he muttered. "Please."

We didn't attack immediately.

No, we stood there, watching, trying to comprehend whatever fresh madness we had walked into.

Because the troll wasn't eating Dorin. It was… Taking care of him. Sort of.

I watched in silent horror as it forced Dorin to wear a tattered cloak made of bat wings, old fur, and mysterious stains, declaring it his "Tiny Hairy Friend's Royal Cloak." Clapped its oversized hands off-beat while making Dorin sing mining songs, giggling in a guttural, snot-filled way. Stirred its "stew"—a bubbling pot of mud, mushrooms, and what looked disturbingly like a boot—then forced Dorin to taste it.

Dorin coughed, shuddering. "It's mud soup. It's literally fucking mud soup."

The troll beamed, patting him on the head. "TINY FRIEND ENJOY SOUP!" It got worse.

The troll, in its infinite wisdom, had also decided that Dorin needed "proper grooming."

With alarming care, it tried to braid his beard. But instead of beard ties, it used moss and rat tails. Introduced him to its "pet rock," a massive boulder with two holes poked in it for eyes. It then forced Dorin to "talk politely to rock. The troll had snored so loudly at night that stalactites literally shook, leaving Dorin sleepless, grumpy, and reconsidering all life choices.

We stood frozen, trying to process the insanity. Umur whispered, "Do we kill it, or…?" I shook my head, sighing. "Let's just… get Dorin out of here."

I stepped forward, clearing my throat.

The troll sniffed the air, its beady black eyes locking onto me.

It blinked. Then its mouth stretched into a massive grin. "MORE TINY HAIRY FRIENDS!"

Dorin groaned. "I hate all of you." The troll clapped happily, pointing at a pile of straw. "FRIENDS CAN SLEEP HERE!"

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "We're not here to sleep, big guy. We're here for our friend."

The troll frowned, looking at Dorin, then back at me. "But… TINY HAIRY FRIEND IS HAPPY HERE?" Dorin gasped. "NO, I AM NOT." The troll's massive shoulders slumped. "But—we braid hair. We eat soup. We sing songs!"

Dorin grabbed my arm. "Gimil. Get me the fuck out of here." The troll pouted. I sighed, placing a hand on my sword hilt. "Look, big guy. We're taking him back, okay? That's final." The troll stared at me for a long moment.

Then, after a deep, shuddering sigh, it picked up Dorin gently—like a **sad child parting with a beloved toy—**and placed him in front of us.

"TINY HAIRY FRIEND MUST GO?" Dorin dusted himself off. "YES."

The troll sniffled, wiping its oversized nose. "...TINY FRIEND COME BACK?" Dorin glared. "Absolutely not."

The troll sobbed, collapsing onto its side, shaking the cavern.

We didn't wait for it to change its mind.

We hurried back through the tunnels, leaving the sniffling troll behind, Dorin walking faster than any dwarf I had ever seen.

The closer we got to Karad'Thul, the more Dorin brightened up. By the time we reached the surface mines, the fresh air hit us like a blessing from the ancestors.

Dorin exhaled deeply. "Never again. Never. Again." Borik, still half-dead from spider venom and exhaustion, just groaned. "I need a week of sleep and a barrel of ale."

Umur chuckled. "That was the weirdest damn thing I've ever seen." I glanced at Dorin. "You gonna talk about it?"

Dorin shot me a look that could turn stone to dust. "Never."

I grinned, slapping him on the back. "Welcome back, Dorin." With that, we made our way back toward the city. The job was done. And we all needed a damn drink.

Deep Feelings

We stumbled into The Murky Badger, a low-ceilinged, smoke-filled tavern, the air thick with the scent of ale, roasted meats, and pipe smoke.

The place was packed—miners, warriors, smiths, and merchants all drinking, laughing, and swapping tales over tankards that never seemed to empty.

We collapsed into a corner table, battered, bruised, and bone-tired after the horrors below. But exhaustion meant nothing when a strong drink was in front of us.

Borik slammed his mug onto the table, grinning. "To Dorin Ironpaw, the beloved pet of a mountain troll!"

Laughter erupted, tankards clanking together.

Dorin groaned, rubbing his temples. "I hate all of you."

Umur chuckled, raising his drink. "To Dorin! And to trolls that braid beards!"

I smiled, lifting my own mug. "And to never, ever talking about it again."

We drank deep, the warmth of good ale and victory filling our bones.

Hours passed in a blur of laughter and tankards.

The more we drank, the funnier the troll incident became. Umur mimicked the troll's deep, slobbering voice, demanding another round of "mud soup." Dorin kept muttering darkly about "never trusting kindness again." Borik told exaggerated tales about how he fought off *twenty* Veilskinners (despite passing out halfway through).

Music kicked up, and the tavern came alive. Dwarves stomped their boots on the wooden floors, shaking the entire tavern. Drunken warriors sang bawdy songs, raising mugs in unison. A group of younger dwarves started dancing, clapping and spinning to the rhythm of fiddle and drum.

We were deep into our cups, warm and merry—

And then— The tavern door exploded open. The door slammed against the wall, rattling the wooden beams.

A heavily armored dwarf stood in the entrance, panting, fuming, his gauntleted fists clenched at his sides.

Bobin Ironcrest. The groom-to-be of Isolde.

His helmet was missing, revealing a sharp, angular face lined with fury, his braided beard trembling in rage.

He took a thunderous step forward, his metal boots clanking against the floorboards.

"WHO IS GIMIL?" he bellowed, his voice booming through the tavern.

Silence fell.

Every dwarf turned, staring at me.

I sighed, taking another long sip of ale, before raising my hand lazily. "That'd be me."

Bobin stormed forward, slamming his gloved fist onto the table, sending tankards rattling.

"You lowborn bastard!" he snarled. "You think you can steal my betrothed?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Steal?"

"You heard me, mason." Bobin sneered, his silver-plated armor gleaming in the firelight.

"I know about you and Isolde. You think you can just waltz in and claim her? A noble lady? You're nothing but a stone-cutting mercenary!"

The entire tavern leaned in.

I leaned back in my chair, smiling. "Didn't know women had owners."

The crowd roared with laughter. Bobin's face turned purple. "I'll cut your damn tongue out!"

I stood up, wiping ale from my beard. "Try it." He stepped even closer, eyes burning. "Fine. I challenge you to a duel."

The tavern erupted in cheers. A fight? Between a Guild Grandmaster and a former King's Guard? Every dwarf in the room rushed outside to watch.

Outside, torches lit the streets, the crowd forming a wide circle, murmuring with anticipation.

Bobin unsheathed a long, polished blade, the mark of the King's Guard still etched into its steel.

I drew my own short sword, rolling my shoulders.

Bobin sneered. "I was trained by the best warriors of the Crown. You? You just fix bridges."

I smiled. "Aye. And I fix broken jaws too."

Bobin struck fast, lunging forward with a flurry of precise, practiced strikes. His blade sliced through the air, coming within inches of my throat.

I barely dodged, raising my shield in time to deflect his next blow. He was quick. Skilled. Dangerous. But he was also drunk with rage.

He swung wildly, trying to overpower me. I ducked under his next slash, slammed my shoulder into his chest, sending him stumbling back.

The crowd cheered.

Bobin charged again, roaring, slamming his blade against my shield, pushing me back a step. I let him get close. Too close. Then—I slammed my forehead into his nose. CRUNCH.

Blood spattered across the cobblestone. Bobin staggered, clutching his face. I didn't let up. I smashed my shield against his ribs, then drove my fist into his gut. He collapsed to his knees, gasping, blood dribbling from his nose. I grabbed him by the collar, growling. "Listen, you pompous shit-stain," I said. "Isolde ain't yours. She never was. She makes her own choices. And if you ever come at me again over a woman who doesn't want you—"

I let him drop to the ground, groaning.

"—I'll bury you myself."

Bobin coughed, rolling onto his side. The fight was over.

The crowd exploded into cheers. I turned to the barkeep. "Ale. Now."

Back inside, the tavern roared with celebration. Music played louder, the fiddle and drums kicking into a frenzied rhythm. Dwarves stomped their boots, clapping, shouting, throwing back tankards of ale. Some sang battle songs, raising their drinks to honor the brawl.

I sat back down, nursing a fresh mug, my knuckles aching but victorious.

The innkeeper, a burly dwarf with a crooked grin, leaned over the counter.

"Well fought, Grandmaster," he chuckled. "You're makin' quite the reputation for yourself."

I smiled. "Aye. Speaking of reputation…"

I tapped my mug against the wood. "What's this I hear about Lais the courtesan?"

The barkeep snorted, shaking his head. "That fox? She's been caught robbing her clients blind. Pickpocketing, snatching coin pouches, even sneaking rings right off fingers in bed."

I raised a brow. "So what's gonna happen to her?"

He grinned. "She's got a bounty on her head now"

The morning came with a dull ache behind my eyes and the lingering taste of strong ale. The brawl with Bobin had left my knuckles swollen, but I'd had worse.

As I walked through the streets of Karad'Thul, the city was already awake—smiths hammering away at their forges, merchants setting up stalls in the market, and stonecutters preparing for the day's work.

But something felt… off. The air was tense, and I noticed more City Watch patrols than usual, their armor gleaming, their faces grim. Something was wrong.

I stepped into the Warriors' Guild, the usual scent of sweat, steel, and mead filling the hall.

At the far end, I spotted Borik, standing near a City Watch officer, deep in discussion.

I made my way over, catching part of their conversation.

"...damn bastards killed four of our men," the Watch officer muttered, his jaw clenched. "If we don't stop them soon, the slums will be lost to them entirely."

Borik noticed me, nodding in greeting. "Gimil. You're just in time."

The Watch officer turned, looking me up and down. "You're the Grandmaster?" he asked.

I nodded. "Aye. What's this about?"

The officer exhaled. "We've got multiple thieves' guilds in the city, but one of them's gotten too bold. The Redhats—a gang that's been operating out of the slums. Last night, we raided one of their hideouts."

I crossed my arms. "And?"

He scowled. "They fought back."

I didn't need to ask for details. The bloodshot eyes, the tight grip on his belt, the anger behind his voice told me everything.

"Four guards murdered in the streets," he continued. "Some of the bastards escaped, including their leader—Guld Redhat. Name comes from the red scarf he always wears."

Borik stepped forward. "The City Watch wants our help tracking them down."

I raised a brow. "And the pay?"

"Four hundred silver for the head of Guld Redhat," the officer said. "Alive. If he's dead, we'll pay half."

I thought it over for a moment. Tracking down a gang leader hiding in the slums? Not an easy task. But four hundred silver was no small sum. I smiled. "Alright. Where do we start?"

Borik handed me a roughly sketched map of the slums, marking the scene of the attack.

"If we're doing this," he said, "we do it right."

The job would take us through the darkest corners of Karad'Thul, and we'd have to work fast.

I rolled up the map, tucking it into my belt. I had a feeling this wasn't going to be clean work. And I wasn't sure if I'd get out of it without more blood on my hands.

The slums of Karad'Thul were a world apart from the stone halls of nobility and the thriving market districts.

Here, the air was thick with filth, the streets narrow and winding, the stench of sewage, unwashed bodies, and rot clinging to every surface.

Houses leaned on one another, their wooden beams cracked, their stone foundations crumbling. Beggars huddled in doorways, their faces hollow, watching every passerby with suspicion or hunger.

I had been here before.

But today, the tension was worse.

The murder of four guards had shaken the district, and the people knew it.

Doors were shut tight. Windows barred.

And on the cobbled streets, the bloodstains still hadn’t been washed away.

Borik, Umur, and I reached the alley where the fight had taken place.

The moment we stepped in, I could feel it.

The stink of death.

Charred wood and splintered stone lined the walls of nearby buildings, signs of a firefight between the City Watch and the Redhats.

Dried blood splattered the walls and ground, dark stains marking where bodies had fallen.

A few daggers and broken blades lay scattered in the dirt, remnants of the battle.

I knelt, touching a puddle of dried crimson.

"This is where they dragged the bodies off," I muttered.

Borik grunted. "Bastards didn’t even leave their own dead behind."

"Means they had time to clean up," Umur said. "But they didn’t get everything."

The few slum-dwellers peeking out of windows and alleys quickly ducked back inside the moment we met their eyes.

They knew who had done this.

But no one wanted to talk.

Borik scowled, arms crossed. "We need someone who saw something."

I scanned the street, my gaze settling on a thin, hunched figure sitting near a pile of rags and broken crates.

A beggar.

His clothes were tattered, his beard matted, but his sharp eyes flickered toward us before quickly looking away.

I walked up to him, crouching slightly. "You saw something, didn’t you?"

The beggar flinched, shaking his head. "I don’t know nothing. Best leave me be."

Borik stepped forward, looming over the man. "If you’re lying, we’ll find out."

The beggar swallowed, looking around nervously.

Finally, he sighed, lowering his voice.

"There was a Redhat, after the fight," he muttered. "Wounded. Staggering through the streets, bleeding like a stuck pig."

"Where?" I asked.

He hesitated.

I reached into my coin pouch, flipping him a silver piece.

His eyes widened, and he snatched it quickly.

"An old warehouse, near the riverfront," he said.

The warehouse wasn't far, tucked away near the edge of the slums, where the stone buildings gave way to old wooden structures.

A massive wooden door hung slightly open, its iron hinges rusted, the interior shrouded in darkness.

The air smelled of damp wood, mildew, and something else…

Blood.

I drew my sword, motioning for silence.

Umur nodded, gripping his axe tightly. Borik, still recovering from his injuries, tightened his grip on his hammer. We stepped inside.

The interior was cluttered with broken crates, half-rotted sacks of grain, rusted tools, and discarded rags.

A lantern flickered in the corner, casting long shadows over the wooden floor.

And in the far end of the warehouse, near a stack of crates, lay a body.

A wounded dwarf, his chest rising and falling shallowly, his clothes stained with blood.

A Redhat. I stepped closer, but something felt… off. The moment my boot hit the floorboard, a soft creak echoed through the warehouse. The Redhat's eyes snapped open. "NOW!" he screamed.

Crossbow bolts rained down from the rafters.

"COVER!" I roared, diving behind a pile of crates as arrows thudded into the floor.

Borik threw up his shield, deflecting a bolt aimed at his head, while Umur rolled behind a stack of barrels, cursing.

Above us, two Redhats had been hiding in the rafters, crossbows primed and ready.

From the shadows, two more thieves emerged, blades drawn, rushing at us. The wounded Redhat staggered to his feet, drawing a dagger. The fight was on.

A Redhat lunged at me, swinging a curved short sword. I ducked, slamming my elbow into his gut, knocking him backward into a crate.

Another came at Borik, but he met the attack with his hammer, crushing the thief's knee with a sickening crack.

Up in the rafters, the crossbowmen reloaded.

One took aim at Umur—

But before he could fire, Umur grabbed a throwing axe from his belt—

And sent it spinning through the air.

The axe buried itself into the thief's chest, sending him tumbling off the rafters with a scream.

The second Redhat fired— The bolt grazed my shoulder, pain flaring up my arm, but I ignored it, charging forward.

I grabbed a dagger from my belt and hurled it, striking him in the throat. Blood spattered against the wooden beams as he fell. The last remaining Redhat, the wounded one, tried to crawl away. I grabbed him by the collar, shoving him against the wall. "You're going to talk," I growled.

He spat blood, grinning despite his wounds.

"You're too late," he wheezed. "Guld's already gone underground. You'll never find him."

I slammed him against the wall harder. "Where?" He chuckled weakly. "Go ask the Rat."

I exchanged a look with Borik and Umur. "Vennik," Borik muttered. "The City Watch's rogue informant." I exhaled. "Looks like we have our next stop." I turned back to the Redhat. "Tell me where the rest of your crew is hiding," I said.

He grinned, blood dripping from his lips. "Go to hell." I sighed, then knocked him out cold. One step closer to Guld Redhat. And we weren't stopping now.

The warehouse fight had given us a name.

Vennik "The Rat."

A former Redhat, turned low-life informant, rumored to sell out his own mother for a bag of silver.

If anyone knew where Guld Redhat was hiding, it would be him.

And according to the City Watch, we'd find him in a tavern as rotten as he was.

We made our way to the Moles Den, a stinking den of filth nestled in the worst part of Karad'Thul's slums.

Even from outside, the reek of spilled ale, unwashed bodies, and burning tallow candles hit me like a punch to the gut.

"Gods," Umur muttered, wrinkling his nose. "This place smells worse than the troll's lair."

Borik grunted. "Then let's make this quick."

We stepped inside.

The tavern was dimly lit, filled with the dregs of the city—thieves, cutthroats, beggars, and desperate men looking for their next coin or corpse.

The walls were stained black from years of smoke, the floorboards sticky with ale and who-knew-what-else.

A group of card players argued in one corner.

A drunken dwarf was passed out face-first on a table.

And near the back of the room, at a round table covered in dice and empty mugs, sat Vennik.

A thin, wiry bastard, with greasy black hair, a long scar down his cheek, and a mouth that never seemed to stop twitching.

Even from here, I could see the rings under his eyes.

A man who never slept easy. His sharp, rat-like gaze flicked toward us as we approached. And immediately, he knew. His whole body tensed. I smiled. "Vennik."

He leaned back in his chair, forcing a grin. "Ahh... To what do I owe the honor?"

I pulled out a chair, flipping it around before sitting. "You know damn well why we're here."

Vennik licked his chapped lips, eyes darting to his dice game, as if he were debating whether to run.

Instead, he reached for a mug of ale, took a long swig, then set it down.

"You're here for Guld." He clicked his tongue, shaking his head. "Shoulda known the Guild would get involved. That bounty's big."

Borik crossed his arms. "We don't have time for your games, Rat. Where is he?"

Vennik sighed dramatically. "I could tell you…"

He rubbed his fingers together. "But information ain't free." I leaned forward, resting my arms on the table. "How much?"

His grin widened. "Fifty silver," he said. Umur barked out a laugh. "Fifty? That's half a suit of armor, you greedy little bastard."

Vennik smiled. "You're not paying for armor, big guy. You're paying for your lives." I tilted my head. "Meaning?" He lowered his voice.

"Guld ain't just hiding," he muttered. "He's waiting. He knows the City Watch—and the Guild—are hunting him. So he's gone to ground."

I exhaled through my nose. "Where?"

Vennik tapped the dice on the table.

I sighed, pulling out ten silver pieces and dropping them in front of him.

He grinned, reaching for the coins— I slammed my knife down between his fingers. The tavern went silent. Vennik froze, his eyes darting from my blade to my face. "You think this is a negotiation, Rat?" I said.

Vennik swallowed. I leaned in, my knife twisting slowly into the wood. "You see, Vennik," I said, "you might be worth fifty silver." "But I think you're worth a lot less with a broken hand."

Vennik licked his lips. "You wouldn't." I smiled. Then I pressed my palm against the hilt of my knife— The blade dug deeper into the wood—right between his knuckles.

Vennik flinched. His hand was pinned. I could see the fear creeping into his eyes.

"Alright, alright!" he gasped, raising his free hand. "No need for that!"

I lifted the knife, just slightly. "Talk." He exhaled sharply. "The Old Market District. Underneath. There's a smuggler's tunnel. That's where they've been hiding."

"Where does it lead?" Borik asked. Vennik hesitated. I slammed the knife back down—not breaking his fingers, but coming damn close. "WHERE?"

He yelped. "An old crypt! Beneath the abandoned chapel! That's where Guld is!" I narrowed my eyes. "That better be true, Rat."

Vennik nodded frantically."I swear on my mother's grave." Umur grunted. "Considering your reputation, that don't mean much."

Vennik sighed. "Look, you got what you wanted. Now, let me drink in peace."

I stood, grabbing one of his coins from the table. "Consider this a discount." And with that, we left.

Back outside, the air was crisp and cold. I glanced at Borik and Umur. "Smuggler's tunnels," I muttered. "Figures."

Borik exhaled. "Crypts beneath the chapel… That place has been abandoned for years." Umur stretched his shoulders, cracking his neck. "Then that's where we're going." I nodded. "Next stop—the sewers."

The sewers beneath Karad'Thul were a labyrinth of tunnels, twisting and snaking beneath the city like the veins of a dead giant.

Few dwarves ever willingly set foot down here—it was a place for runoff, rats, and rot.

But today, we had no choice.

Guld Redhat was down here somewhere.

And we were going to flush him out.

The entrance to the sewers was hidden behind an old iron grate in the Old Market District.

We found the rusted gate ajar, its lock broken, the hinges still swaying slightly—a sign that someone had been through here recently.

I stepped inside first, the air thick with filth and damp stone.

The tunnels stretched out in all directions, dimly lit by the occasional shaft of light filtering through storm drains.

Water ran in sluggish currents, carrying discarded rags, rotten scraps, and things I didn't want to think too much about.

Borik wrinkled his nose. "By the Gods, this stinks worse than Umur after a battle."

Umur snorted. "At least I don't smell like your cooking."

I ignored them, scanning the slick walls for markings—signs of Redhat movement. Then I saw it. A symbol scratched into the stone—a small red dagger. I traced it with my fingers, feeling the fresh etchings. "This way," I muttered.

We moved forward, boots squelching in the wet grime. The tunnels twisted ahead, and I could feel it—we weren't alone down here. Further in, we found the first real signs of activity.

A makeshift camp—old crates stacked against the walls, a few bedrolls, an extinguished firepit, and scattered rations.

A leather pouch lay discarded near a broken barrel. I knelt, flipping it open. Inside were a few silver coins, a bloody cloth, and a knife with the same red dagger symbol on its hilt.

"Recently abandoned," I murmured. "They're not far." Borik ran his hand over the wall, rubbing the damp stone between his fingers. "The water's still rippling. Someone passed through here not long ago."

Umur pulled his axe from his back. "Then let's find them." We continued down the tunnel, stepping over loose bricks and rusted iron grates.

Then the air changed. A new smell filled the sewer. Something worse than rot. Something hungry. And before I could call for silence— A low, wet hiss echoed through the tunnel. And suddenly, we weren't just hunting the Redhats anymore. Something moved in the dark.

A slithering mass, the sound of slick flesh scraping against stone. Then—a ripple in the water. A giant, bloated shape emerged from the shadows, dragging itself forward with pale, clawed hands. Its skin was translucent, its veins pulsing beneath the surface, its eyes milky white.

And when its mouth opened, rows of needle-like teeth gnashed in a circular motion, a putrid hiss escaping from deep within its throat.

"FUCK." Umur took a step back, raising his axe. "What the hell is THAT?"

"A sewer ooze feeder," Borik said grimly, pulling his hammer free. "They grow big on filth, corpses… and anything that moves."

And then, the thing lunged.

I barely dodged aside as the beast's mouth clamped shut where my head had been seconds ago.

Its clawed hands lashed out, raking through the stone walls, tearing chunks of brick and mortar loose. I slashed at its side, but the blade barely cut through its rubbery flesh.

The thing howled, its voice a gurgling, wet shriek, before barreling toward Borik.

Borik raised his shield, bracing— The impact sent him flying back into the water, his body slamming into the stone wall. "Get the hell up!" Umur barked, swinging his axe down on the creature's spine.

The blade bit deep, dark sludge oozing from the wound. But instead of slowing down, the beast whipped around, wrapping a tentacle-like limb around Umur's leg, yanking him into the sewer water.

Umur cursed, struggling to break free.

I saw an opening— I grabbed a rusted iron spear from a pile of discarded weapons nearby, flipping it in my hands. And then I drove it into the monster's open mouth. The tip pierced through the back of its throat, the shaft shattering teeth and bone.

The creature convulsed violently, its body seizing, its claws twitching. Then, with a final death rattle, it collapsed into the sewer, unmoving. The water rippled around it, and then, finally… Silence.

Umur dragged himself out of the water, wiping sludge from his face.

"That was… disgusting." Borik coughed. "Could be worse." I rolled my shoulders, catching my breath. Then I saw it—fresh footprints leading further down the tunnel.

The Redhats had come this way. And now, they were trapped ahead. I pointed to the trail. "They went that way. They must've gotten past the beast before it settled here."

Umur grinned, cracking his knuckles. "Then let's finish this."

We followed the trail of footprints, winding through the last stretch of tunnels. Ahead, the air changed again. The scent of old stone, damp moss, and burning torches filled the corridor. We were near the crypts. And somewhere inside… Guld Redhat was waiting. I gripped my blade.

The sewer tunnel ended at a heavy stone doorway, its surface slick with damp moss and age-worn carvings.

Beyond this, we weren't in the sewers anymore. We had reached the old crypts. And Guld Redhat was waiting. We pushed the door open, stepping into a vast underground chamber. Torches flickered dimly, casting long shadows against the arched ceilings.

Ancient stone sarcophagi lined the walls, their chiseled dwarven faces worn smooth by time.

But the crypts had been defiled. Crates and stolen goods were piled haphazardly against the walls.Bloodstained cots and half-eaten meals littered the floor. A makeshift table in the center bore a large city map, marked with Redhat targets and smuggling routes.

And standing across the room, waiting, was Guld Redhat.

He was tall for a dwarf, clad in studded leather armor, his long red scarf wrapped tight around his throat.

His piercing eyes locked onto us as we entered, his daggers glinting in the torchlight.

Around him stood six Redhat enforcers, each gripping curved blades and crossbows.

Guld smiled. "So," he said, voice dripping with amusement. "The Guild's attack dogs finally found me."

I stepped forward, sword in hand. "You've nowhere left to run, Guld." His grin widened. "You sure about that?" Then he snapped his fingers. And the Redhats attacked.

The fight erupted instantly, the chamber filling with the clash of steel, the shouts of battle, and the rush of feet across cold stone.

One Redhat charged me, twin blades flashing.

I parried his first strike, then drove my knee into his gut, shoving him backward.

Another swung for my head—I barely dodged, feeling the blade slice a few strands of my hair.

To my left, Umur bellowed, hacking through a thief's collarbone, sending him crumpling to the floor.

Borik blocked a crossbow bolt with his shield, then smashed a hammer into an archer's ribs, breaking them with a sickening crunch.

But Guld didn't wait.

He moved like a shadow, slipping behind his men, weaving between sarcophagi, waiting for his moment.

And then—

I felt the sting of steel.

Pain flared along my ribs, the burn of a blade cutting deep.

I spun, catching sight of Guld slipping back into the dark, his bloodied dagger flashing.

He was fast. Too fast. He circled like a wolf in the shadows, striking whenever we left an opening. I growled, gripping my bleeding side. "Face me, coward!" I roared.

Guld chuckled, stepping forward. "Oh, I will," he said. "But you're already dead, Gimil." I frowned. Then I felt it. A cold, creeping numbness spreading from the wound.

Poison.

I staggered back, my vision swimming for a brief moment. Guld grinned, rushing in for the killing blow— But I threw my shield up, blocking his dagger just in time. I gritted my teeth.

I had one chance. As he recoiled, I swung my sword low, sweeping his legs. He stumbled, cursing—just enough time for me to grab my belt flask. Dwarven fire-whiskey. I uncorked it with my teeth, poured the burning liquid over my wound, and bit back the pain.

The poison would still weaken me. But I wasn't dying yet. And now, I was pissed. Guld lunged again. I met him head-on, blocking one dagger, dodging the second. Then I caught his wrist, twisting hard. His blade clattered to the floor. His eyes widened—he knew.

With a grunt of effort, I slammed him against a stone pillar, pressing my forearm against his throat. "You're done," I growled. He struggled, gasping. Then he did something stupid. He spat in my face. "Go to hell," he hissed. I slammed his head against the stone, knocking him out cold. The fight was over.

We dragged Guld through the streets, bound in heavy iron chains, his scarf ripped from his throat.

Word spread fast.

By the time we reached the city square, a crowd had already gathered.

The City Watch Captain met us at the gallows, his face grim.

"Good work," he said, nodding to us. "We end this now."

I turned to Guld, who had regained consciousness, but said nothing. No more smiles. No more laughter. Just silence.

The Captain gestured to the hangman. The rope was placed around his neck. The crowd watched in eerie silence. Then— The trapdoor dropped. And just like that, Guld Redhat was dead. His body dangled, swaying gently in the morning breeze.

The city had its justice. And we had our coin.

We stood in the Warriors' Guild, our coin purses heavier, our bodies sore but victorious. Borik exhaled, counting his share of the bounty. Umur grinned. "Could've been worse." I took a long swig of ale, wiping my mouth. "It always could've been worse."

And then I leaned back in my chair, knowing full well… That the next job was just around the corner.

The city had barely settled from the execution of Guld Redhat when a knock came at my door.

It was early morning, my head still heavy with ale and exhaustion, but when I saw the gold-and-silver crest of the King's Messenger, I knew this wasn't some petty guild request.

This was royal business.

The messenger was a stiff-backed, gray-haired dwarf, dressed in deep crimson robes, his expression unreadable.

He cleared his throat. "Grandmaster Gimil." I grunted, rubbing my eyes. "Aye?"

He reached into his satchel, pulling out a scroll sealed with the King's sigil. "The King requests your presence at once."I frowned, taking the scroll. "For what?"

"The King will explain himself." I exhaled, shaking off my weariness. Royal summons weren't optional.

I grabbed my coat, strapped on my belt, and followed the messenger into the Keep.

The royal keep loomed above us, its stone towers carved from the very bones of the mountain.

Inside, the King’s Hall was warm with torchlight, the walls lined with tapestries depicting great battles, lost kings, and forgotten victories.

And at the far end, seated on his throne of iron and granite, was King Thrain Stonehelm.

His crown gleamed under the light, his braided beard resting heavy against his armored chest.

But his expression was grave.

"Gimil Ironborn," he rumbled, his voice deep as a war drum. "I have a task for you. One that must remain secret."

I stepped forward, bowing my head. "I am listening, my King."

He gestured to his advisor, a robed dwarf with runed rings along his fingers.

The advisor unfurled a scroll, revealing an ancient map—not of the city, but of something beneath it.

"Beneath this Keep," the King began, "lies something long forgotten. A ruin older than Karad’Thul itself."

I frowned. "Ruins? Beneath the Keep?"

"Aye," the King nodded. "The remnants of an older age. One that predates even my bloodline."

He leaned forward, his eyes sharp.

"Inside those ruins lies a relic: The Stone King’s Crown. An artifact of our first kings."

"And you want me to retrieve it," I guessed. The King’s gaze darkened. "I want you to recover it before anyone else does."

The King’s fingers tightened on his throne. "There are whispers… that it holds something beyond power.”

A long silence filled the hall. I let the words sink in. I exhaled slowly. "Sounds like a damn fine task."

The King nodded. "If you succeed, you will be rewarded beyond measure."

The Royal Library was older than most of the city itself, its great stone halls filled with tomes, scrolls, and secrets buried by time.

I had spent some time here in my youth, but never in the restricted wing.

Today, I would.

I stepped inside, the scent of old parchment and wax candles filling the air.

An elderly librarian, his beard white as fresh snow, glanced up from his desk.

"You seek forbidden knowledge, Grandmaster?" he asked, eyes twinkling with curiosity.

I grunted. "Aye. The ruins beneath the Keep."

He raised a brow. "The First Halls?" "That's the one." He gestured toward a long wooden table, already stacked with aged scrolls and crumbling maps.

"I took the liberty of preparing the relevant texts." I grunted. "You were expecting me?" He chuckled, stroking his beard. "The King keeps no secrets from his scholars."

I sat down, rolling out a brittle parchment. At the top, scrawled in runes as old as the stone itself, was a warning: *"Only those worthy may pass the Stone King's Gate."*

I exhaled. "Alright," I muttered. "Let's see what you bastards were hiding."

The next few hours were spent in deep study—examining ancient dwarven script, cross-referencing older accounts, and sketching interpretations in my own notebook.

The ruins weren't just a burial site.

As I worked through the final translation, one passage stood out from the rest.

"The Crown is not merely a relic. It is a burden. A throne unyielding, a duty unbroken. To wear it is to remember. To wear it is to awaken."

I frowned. The advisor had been right. This wasn't just a royal heirloom. This thing had power. The question was—what kind? I rubbed my temples, exhaling. Whatever the truth, I'd find out soon enough. Because tomorrow, I would be opening the gate to the ruins beneath the Keep. And I had the sinking feeling that it would be watching.

The next morning, I stood before a door that had not been opened for centuries.

Beneath King Thrain Stonehelm's Keep, hidden within a forgotten chamber of black stone, lay the sealed entrance to the First Halls.

The ruins of the old dwarven kings.

And behind this gate… the Stone King's Crown.

The doorway was massive, carved from solid basalt, its surface engraved with runes that glowed faintly, as if still pulsing with old magic.

A circular archway of intricately worked stone framed the entrance, its edges lined with names—

Names of long-dead kings, their titles etched deep into the rock.

The sealing runes were still active, glowing in dull red and blue hues, woven into a pattern of protection and trial.

A warning to any who sought to enter.

Behind me, King Thrain stood, his expression unreadable, his royal guards flanking him in silent formation.

He spoke, his voice measured.

"The door has remained shut for over five hundred years, Gimil Ironborn. Not even my ancestors dared open it."

I exhaled, running my fingers along the ancient symbols.

"Then let's hope they didn't seal something in."

I pulled out my notebook, flipping to the rune translations from the Royal Library.

The inscription at the center of the door read:

"Only those of ancient dwarven blood, bearing stone's wisdom, may pass the gate."

It wasn't just a lock. It was a test. And to open it, I needed to prove my worth.

I studied the ancient runes, muttering the words of old dwarven chants under my breath.

The seal was built on three components: Heritage – Blood of a dwarf worthy of the First Halls. Wisdom – Understanding the runes and their meaning. Honor – Proving I wasn't here to steal, but to restore.

I unsheathed my knife, rolling up my sleeve.

Then, in front of the King and his advisors, I pressed the blade against my palm and let a single drop of blood fall onto the center sigil.

The runes reacted instantly—their glow intensifying, shifting into patterns I recognized from my studies.

I stepped forward, placing my hands against the door.

Then I spoke the ancient words.

"Khaz'dural ekh thain. Kharum doraz'fel. Open the way to the First Halls."

The ground rumbled. The air grew heavy. Then, slowly, the door shifted.

With a deep, grinding noise, the massive stone gate trembled, dust cascading from its edges as its locks unraveled.

The runes flared brightly—then faded to nothing. A final shudder passed through the stone—And then, with a sound like ancient mountains groaning, the door split open.

Beyond it lay darkness. A yawning black abyss, untouched by time. The First Halls had been sealed away for centuries. Now, they were open again. I took a deep breath, gripping the hilt of my sword.

The King’s voice was quiet, but firm. "You go forward alone, Grandmaster Ironborn." I nodded. "Aye."

With that, I stepped into the forgotten halls of the First Kings. And the shadows swallowed me whole.

The moment I stepped through the doorway, the silence was absolute.

The air was thick, heavy with the scent of damp stone, ancient dust, and something else—something old, lingering beyond time itself.

As the light from the Keep’s torches faded behind me, I stood in darkness.

The First Halls had not been touched in over five centuries. And yet… I could feel that I was not alone. I struck a torch, its flame flickering weakly against the vast chamber before me.

The hall was massive, stretching into the dark like the ribcage of a fallen titan.

Great pillars of black stone lined the path, each carved with intricate dwarven runes, their edges softened by time.

Beyond them, rows upon rows of stone thrones stood in eerie silence—each occupied.

Dwarven statues sat upon them, their features grim, their beards chiseled with precision.

But as I stepped forward, I realized something chilling. They weren’t statues.They were tombs.

The first kings of our kind, seated in eternal vigil, their remains encased in stone, bound to their thrones for all time.

I exhaled, my breath visible in the cold air."Ancestors watch me," I muttered. Then I pressed forward.

The halls were vast, their ceilings lost in shadow, the walls lined with forgotten murals.

Scenes of battles long past, of kings forging empires, of cities rising from the stone.

Each carving told a story, but one thing stood out.

In every image, one figure remained constant—a towering dwarf, his crown wreathed in stone, his eyes hollow, watching.

The Stone King. The one whose crown I sought. The closer I looked, the more uneasy I felt. There was something… wrong about the way the figure was depicted. In the last mural, his mouth was open, and figures knelt before him.

But they weren't in worship. They were screaming. A shiver ran down my spine. And then— A whisper. I froze. It came from everywhere.

A low, ancient voice—not spoken, but felt, rippling through the stone like an echo lost in time.

"Who comes to disturb the halls of the First Kings?"

The flame of my torch flickered, struggling to hold against the unnatural cold.

I gripped my sword tightly.

"Grandmaster Gimil Ironborn, sent by King Thrain Stonehelm," I said, my voice steady.

The whisper did not answer immediately.

But the air shifted, a deep, resounding hum vibrating through the very bones of the earth.

Then the voice spoke again, closer this time—right behind me.

"The Stone King watches."

I turned sharply, but there was nothing there. Only dust. Only shadows. Only the feeling that something had just moved past me. I pushed on, my breath slow, my hand never leaving my sword hilt.

At the end of the great hall, past the silent thrones, past the murmuring statues, I saw it. A throne of jagged black stone, taller than the rest.And upon it sat a figure wrapped in shadow, its features lost to time.

But on its head, a crown of carved mountain rock, etched with runes of power, pulsing faintly in the dark.

The Stone King's Crown. The relic I had come for. And yet— I hesitated. Something about it felt… wrong. The very air seemed to bend around it, shifting, warping, as though the stone itself was breathing. I stepped forward, reaching out. And the moment I did— The figure in the throne opened its eyes.

A deep rumbling shook the chamber, dust falling from the ceiling, the torches flickering violently.

The throne-bound figure moved, its voice a deep, guttural rasp, as though spoken from the depths of the earth itself. *"You seek the crown of kings."*

The shadow shifted, and I felt eyes of burning gold lock onto me. *"Then prove you are worthy."*

The chamber lurched, and suddenly, the ground beneath me split open, revealing a pit of blackness. A trial had begun.

The whisper became a roar, a voice from the depths of history, a challenge older than the kingdom itself.

"Strength is not enough."
"Wisdom alone will not save you."
"Will you take the burden of kings?"

I felt the air around me constrict, the weight of the chamber pressing against my very soul.

This was no ordinary test. It wasn't just about taking the crown. It was about accepting the truth of the First Kings. And whether I would carry the weight of what came next.

I straightened, gripping my sword, staring into the hollow, ancient gaze of the Stone King. And I spoke. *"I am Gimil Ironborn. And I will take what is mine."*

The halls trembled, the shadows deepened, and the crown began to glow. The final test had begun. And soon, I would learn if I had truly earned my place among the First Kings.

The chamber shook with power, the shadows shifting, as if something ancient and unseen was stirring within the walls themselves.

The Stone King's hollow eyes glowed faintly, and the crown atop his head pulsed with a deep, slow rhythm—a heartbeat in stone.

This was no simple treasure. This was a burden. A test that had been waiting for centuries for one fool or hero to come and claim it. And I had come.

A gust of wind that should not have existed howled through the chamber. The pillars groaned, and the figures entombed in their stone thrones began to shift. And then, one by one, they rose. Not as men. Not as ghosts.

But as stone warriors, their bodies encased in crumbling rock, their weapons drawn, their eyes empty. There were five of them. All former kings of old, bound to this place, their souls locked in eternal servitude to the test.

"You seek the crown of kings," the Stone King intoned. "Then fight as a king would."

The warriors rushed forward. The first warrior swung a massive hammer, cracking the floor where I had just been standing.

I rolled aside, bringing my sword upward, slicing into his stone-carved ribs. Sparks flew, but the blade did nothing. Damn it.

The second warrior came at me from the side, thrusting a rusted greatsword in a quick, precise strike.

I barely had time to raise my shield, the impact sending shockwaves down my arm.

They weren't mindless. They still remembered how to fight. I needed to change tactics.

I backed toward one of the pillars, letting the warriors come at me together.

Just as the first warrior swung his hammer again, I sidestepped— And the blow crashed into the second warrior, sending him stumbling. The first hesitated for just a second. And that was all I needed. I dropped low and sliced at his leg joints, aiming not at the stone, but the cracks in the armor where the magic was weakest.

The first warrior faltered, his movement sluggish. The others came at me, but now I had a plan. One by one, I dodged, deflected, and struck where they were weakest—until finally, the last warrior collapsed into dust.

I stood panting, my sword slick with grit and magic. The Stone King watched.

"You wield strength. But strength alone does not rule."

The air grew heavier.

"A king must see the truth."

The chamber around me shifted. The stone became fog, the walls vanished, and suddenly, I was standing elsewhere. A memory. Or an illusion.

Before me was a golden hall, filled with cheering dwarves, feasting, drinking, celebrating. At the end of the table, a younger version of myself sat, wearing the Stone King's Crown. But the cheers were hollow. And when I looked closer— I realized the feasting dwarves had no faces. Just empty voids where their eyes and mouths should have been. And yet, they clapped, laughed, spoke in voices that weren't their own. The Stone King's voice whispered through the illusion.

"A crown is not just power—it is the weight of history."

"It is the burden of every king before you."

"Will you carry it, knowing it will shape you into something you do not recognize?"

I clenched my fists. The feasting figures turned to me, their hollow faces watching. Waiting for my answer. I took a deep breath. And I answered.

"A king does not seek the crown for power."

"He takes it to protect what must endure."

The hall collapsed into shadow. And I was back in the chamber. The Stone King's figure had changed. No longer a statue, but a wraith of stone and light, standing before me. He raised a hand, and the crown lifted from his head, hovering in the air. *"You have proven yourself, Gimil Ironborn."*

"But now comes the final choice."

The crown pulsed, its runes glowing with ancient power. *"To take this crown is to take its truth."*

"The First Kings were not rulers of honor—but conquerors. Thieves of the deep, who forged Karad'Thul not from wisdom, but from blood."

"If you place the crown upon your head, you will know it all. The good… and the terrible."

"Will you bear the weight of the past?"

"Or will you leave it buried?"

The air was suffocating. I could feel the history clawing at me, waiting to be known. If I took the crown, I would gain power, favor, and a place in legend. But I would also inherit the truth of the First Kings. And perhaps, some things were better left forgotten. I looked at the crown. I looked at the Stone King. And then, I made my choice.

The Stone King's Crown hovered before me, pulsing with an ancient, slow heartbeat, the runes carved into its surface glowing faintly in the dark.

The ghostly figure of the Stone King stood motionless, his hollow eyes fixed on me, waiting for my final decision.

The air was heavy, filled with the weight of centuries of history, of kings who had come before, of secrets long buried beneath the Keep.

I could feel it—the truth pressing against my mind, clawing to be known.

And yet…

"Will you bear the weight of the past? Or leave it buried?"

The question hung in the air, waiting.

I took a deep breath, my fingers twitching toward the crown.

And then, I made my choice.

I reached forward and took the crown.

The moment my hands touched the cold, rune-carved stone, a surge of energy shot through my body.

I gasped, staggering backward, my vision blurring, the chamber around me spinning.

Flashes of history burned into my mind.

I saw the First Kings—not as noble rulers, but as warlords.

A line of dwarven conquerors, claiming the mountain with blood and steel, forging a kingdom not through diplomacy, but through slaughter.

They had not built Karad'Thul. They had taken it. From others. From those who had lived in the depths before them.

I saw the great betrayal, the forging of the crown not as a symbol of honor—but as a shackle, binding its wearer to the oaths and sins of those who came before.

And I saw what they had buried. Beneath the Keep. Beneath the deepest halls. Something they had sealed away in stone, fearing what they had awoken. A presence.

A shadow older than dwarves themselves. And now— It knew I had seen it. I gasped, snapping back to reality, my knees hitting the cold stone. The crown still sat in my hands, its runes now burning white-hot, the power inside it stirring once more.

The Stone King's wraith stood before me, silent. Watching.

"You have taken the burden."

His voice rumbled like shifting mountains.

"Then let it be yours to bear."

The chamber shook, the torches flickering violently, the spirits of the First Kings shuddering in their tombs.

I could feel it—the crown binding itself to me, its whispers crawling through my mind, etching its truths into my soul.

I clenched my jaw, forcing my breath steady. I would not break. I would not be a slave to the past. I rose to my feet, gripping the crown tightly. *"I take this crown not to rule, but to remember,"* I said.

The Stone King's wraith nodded. And then, he faded into dust. I stepped out of the First Halls, my steps heavy, but resolute. The King's guards turned, their expressions tight with anticipation. And there, standing in the torchlight, waiting for me, was King Thrain Stonehelm.

His eyes fell to the crown in my hands. For a moment, the hall was silent. Then, the King spoke. "You have done what none before you dared, Gimil Ironborn."

I met his gaze, feeling the weight of what I had learned pressing against my chest. And yet, I said nothing. I had taken the crown. And with it—its secrets. Secrets that perhaps should never be spoken aloud.

King Thrain extended his hand. "The relic belongs to the dwarves," he said.

I hesitated. Then, finally, I placed the Stone King's Crown in his grasp. He studied it for a moment. Then his eyes flicked back to mine. "You have earned your reward," he said.

He turned to his advisors, giving a single nod. "From this day forward, you are Gimil Ironborn, Royal Master Mason of Karad'Thul."

A title spoken only once in an age. I exhaled. The weight of the past was mine to bear. And though the crown now rested in the hands of the King… I knew its whispers would never leave me.

Connections

Time passed like the slow carving of stone beneath a mason's chisel, shaping something strong, enduring, and inevitable.

Since recovering the Stone King's Crown, I had become a regular presence within the halls of King Thrain Stonehelm. My expertise in architecture, fortifications, and ancient structures was called upon frequently.

Some days, I advised on repairs to the Keep itself, reinforcing the pillars of the grand hall, or inspecting the deep vaults where the kingdom's wealth and relics were kept.

Other times, I sat with the High Council, discussing future expansions, mines, and defense projects—ensuring Karad'Thul would stand unshaken for centuries to come.

And in between those duties… I saw Isolde. More than before. More than ever.

At first, our meetings were casual—shared meals in the upper halls, long discussions of craftsmanship, old dwarven artistry, and the hidden meanings behind carvings lost to time.

But soon, our walks grew longer—strolling beneath the towering halls of Karad'Thul, beneath glowing crystal lanterns, past ancient murals and still fountains where the water had not rippled for ages.

Isolde was as sharp-minded as she was beautiful, always eager to listen, always ready with her own insights.

She was no delicate noblewoman, content to sit in a chamber and weave.

No, she was of the mountain, just like me.

One evening, as we stood on the balcony of the King's Tower, the glow of the forge-fires flickering below, she turned to me and said: *"I never wanted to marry for duty."*

I glanced at her, sensing the weight of her words. *"But you would marry for love?"* I asked.

She smiled, tucking a stray braid behind her ear.*"I would marry for you."*

That night, she came to my chambers. And every night after that, she did not leave.

Seasons passed, and the whispers in the King's Hall began.

The Grandmaster of Stone and the Lady Isolde were inseparable.

It was no surprise when one evening, after a feast in the King's hall, she took my hand, pressed it against her belly, and whispered:

"We're expecting."

I felt my breath hitch, my calloused fingers stilling against her warmth. A child. A future. A legacy carved in stone and blood.

I had fought wars. Built bridges, towers, and great halls. But nothing felt as real, as permanent, as the life we had created together.

Soon, a royal wedding was declared. And all of Karad'Thul prepared for the union.

The King's Chapel stood within the heart of the Keep, its vaulted ceilings carved with celestial dwarven constellations, its great doors of oak and gold thrown wide for the occasion.

Braziers blazed with sacred flames, and runes of unity shimmered along the pillars—etched prayers of the Ancestors, blessing the bond about to be sealed.

The High Priest of Moradin, the god of dwarven creation and craftsmanship, stood at the altar, his voice steady as the stone beneath us.

The guests filled the chapel, clad in their finest attire—lords, guildmasters, warriors, and artisans, all gathered to witness the forging of a new house in dwarven history.

At the front row sat King Thrain Stonehelm, his golden beard braided in ceremonial knots, and beside him, Queen Veldra Silverheart, a woman of piercing blue eyes and regal poise.

And then, the doors opened, and Isolde entered.

She was breathtaking.

Draped in royal blue and silver, her gown embroidered with patterns of the mountain's veins, shimmering like the very ore beneath the stone.

Her hair was woven with mithril-threaded braids, her eyes shining like polished gems, filled with the fire of a dwarven woman who had chosen her fate.

I met her gaze, and for the first time in years, I felt a different kind of battle raging in my chest. Not of steel. Not of war. But of love.

She stepped before me, and the priest raised his hands. "In the name of Moradin, in the presence of our ancestors, beneath the halls carved by the hands of our forefathers, we witness this union."

He turned to Isolde first.

"Do you, Isolde of the House of Anvilar, take this dwarf, Gimil Ironborn, as your husband, to forge a future as unshaken as the mountains?"

Her voice was steady, unwavering.

"I do."

The priest turned to me.

"And do you, Gimil Ironborn, take this woman as your wife, to build a home as strong as the stone beneath us?"

I swallowed, the weight of everything settling deep in my bones. "Aye," I said.

The priest nodded. "Then by the will of our people and the blessings of the forge, I bind you as one."

He placed a hammer and chisel before us—a sacred tradition. Together, we struck the stone before the altar, marking it with our names, forever etched in the chapel.

And when we stood, the hall erupted in cheers.

The royal chambers had been transformed for the grand celebration. Tables overflowed with roasted meats, spiced breads, honeyed ales, and golden mead. Musicians played lively dwarven tunes, their lutes and drums filling the halls with joy.

Dwarves stomped their boots upon the stone, raising their glasses, voices booming with song and laughter. Among the guests sat the Guildmasters, the High Council, warriors, merchants, and masons alike.

The King himself raised a glass, his booming voice silencing the hall for a moment.

"To Gimil and Isolde Ironborn, may their love be as unyielding as the mountain’s core!"

A cheer roared through the hall, tankards clashing together, wine and ale spilling over.

Isolde sat beside me, her hand resting over her belly, where our child grew.

I turned to her, our faces close, our future uncertain but promising.

"Are you happy?" I asked. She smiled, pressing a kiss to my cheek. "Happier than I’ve ever been."

Kings Orders

The halls of Karad'Thul had barely settled from the celebration of my wedding when a new summons came from King Thrain Stonehelm.

A diplomatic envoy sent to parley with the Duergar of Dûm'Zarak had vanished.

No word. No trace. And the King feared the worst. He needed someone he trusted to uncover what had happened. And that someone was me.

I stood before King Thrain Stonehelm, my hands resting on the belt of my armor, my mind already racing through possibilities.

The King's brow was furrowed, a sealed letter crushed between his fingers.

"This was the last message from the envoy, Lord Baryn Stonevein," he said, tossing the parchment onto the stone table before me.

I picked it up, scanning the words written in hurried, uneven script.

"The negotiations proceed, but the Duergar grow restless.
There are whispers in the tunnels—
something is hunting in the dark.
If we do not return, know this: The shadows are not empty."

I exhaled, setting the letter down.

"He was meeting the Duergar in neutral ground?" I asked.

"Aye," the King nodded. "A chamber below the lower tunnels—deep where you once investigated the kidnapped miners."

That wasn't comforting. I had seen horrors down there before. And now, it seemed there were more.

"Bring him home, Gimil," the King said, his voice steady. "Or at least… bring me the truth."

I nodded. "I'll find him."

And with that, I left the Keep, heading into the tunnels once more. The deeper roads of Karad'Thul were well-worn but always carried a sense of unease. Torches flickered dimly, casting long shadows as I moved through the lower districts, past the last guard post before the darkness.

A few warriors had volunteered to accompany me, but I turned them down. This was a job for one, not many. I needed silence. I needed to move unnoticed.

As I passed into the old mining tunnels, the air grew colder, the scent of earth and stagnant water thick. I retraced the path I had taken months ago, the place where goblins had once broken through the mines, where Duergar tunnels had led into deeper dangers.

And then, I found the first sign of trouble. At the entrance of the abandoned chamber, the floor was slick with dried blood. Not fresh. A day old, maybe two. But no bodies.

Only the drag marks leading deeper inside.

I clenched my jaw, drawing my short sword, my boots crunching softly over the dried crimson.

The chamber itself was wrecked.

Broken tables, shattered scrolls, a torn banner of the King's sigil, its fabric smeared in black soot.

A struggle had taken place here. But there was no sign of the envoy. I kneeled beside the bloodstains, my fingers running over a deep groove in the stone. Something had been dragged. There were strange claw marks on the ground.

Uneven. Twisted. A deep sense of unease settled in my gut. I had seen tracks like these before. And I knew what it meant. I was not alone in these tunnels.

A low, chittering sound echoed from the passage ahead. Something inhuman. Something watching. I slowly turned, my eyes narrowing into the shadows beyond the ruined chamber. And that was when I saw it.

A shape skulking against the stone, its body twisted and wrong.

A Vhraal.

The cursed creatures of the deep roads, feeding not on flesh alone, but on fear itself. It was watching me, its pupil-less eyes reflecting the dim torchlight, its jaw twitching unnaturally.

And behind it, I saw something worse. Hanging against the stone wall—bound, battered, barely breathing—was Lord Baryn Stonevein. Still alive. But not for long.

The Vhraal lurched forward, its limbs moving in unnatural angles, its mouth splitting open in a jagged, too-wide grin.

I had seen many things in my life. But nothing as unnerving as a creature that wore a man's fear like a cloak. And I knew that if I let fear take hold, it would only grow stronger. I raised my blade, bracing myself.

The Vhraal moved fast, darting across the floor, its clawed hands outstretched. I barely had time to step aside before its blackened talons raked the air where my head had been. I struck out, my sword biting into its side— Only for the wound to close instantly, the creature's body knitting itself back together. Damn it.

They regenerated. But they weren't unstoppable. I had fought things like this before. And there was always a way.

I reached for my belt flask, flipping the cap open with my teeth. The oil within sloshed as I poured it over my blade, the air filling with the scent of burning resin.

The Vhraal hesitated. It knew. And then, I lit the blade aflame. The torchlight reflected in its pupil-less eyes, and for the first time… I saw fear in it. I charged.

The Vhraal screeched as I drove my flaming sword into its chest, the fire eating away at its unnatural flesh.

It convulsed, its limbs twisting, its screams echoing through the tunnels. Then, with one last howl, it collapsed into ash. I exhaled, my blade still burning, stepping over the remains.

Then I turned to Lord Baryn.

He was barely conscious, his breathing ragged, but his eyes flickered open.

"It was the Duergar," he rasped. "It was… the tunnels… they were…"

I pressed a waterskin to his lips, helping him drink. " Rest," I murmured.

I turned my gaze back to the ruins. This had been a diplomatic betrayal.

And yet… the King could not know. If he knew the Duergar were to blame, war would break out. And I had seen enough of history's shadows to know the truth.

Karad'Thul was a city taken from the Duergar. This was not their crime. But they would suffer for it unless I made a choice. I exhaled, staring at the ashes of the Vhraal.

Then, slowly, I prepared the false report. The envoy was dead. Killed by creatures of the dark.

No war. No bloodshed. A lie, to protect the city.

I had buried the truth once before.

And now, I would bury it again.

The lie I had told to King Thrain Stonehelm was already sealed, the fate of Lord Baryn Stonevein buried beneath words and falsehoods.

The Vhraal had taken him, and that was the story Karad'Thul would believe.

But I needed to know the truth.

Something about this whole matter didn't sit right.

So, I set out—alone, this time not for the King, not for the Guilds, but for myself.

To uncover what truly happened in the depths.

So I went alone.

I followed the same path I had walked before, the tunnels where we had once searched for the lost miners—but this time, I went deeper.

Back to the shadows where the Duergar ruled.

The journey through the lower tunnels was long, the silence heavier than before.

I passed the abandoned tunnels, where the blood of lost miners had once stained the stone, where Duergar passageways cut into the rock like black scars.

I knew these tunnels well now—I had fought in them before, killed in them before.

The air grew thick with iron and oil, the scent of smoke and molten metal drifting through the cavernous expanse ahead.

I had reached the Duergar mines.

The last time I was here, I had been sneaking past their workers, their automatons whirring and grinding as they worked the stone.

Now, I walked openly.

The massive metal constructs still worked, their gears churning, their red-glowing eyes scanning the crates they carried.

Duergar miners moved between them, their expressions dull, their bodies hardened by the labor.

None stopped me, but they watched.

They knew.

And before long, their guards found me.

Three Duergar warriors approached—broad, heavy-set, their armor blackened from the forge, their eyes gleaming red in the dim torchlight.

One stepped forward, gripping a war axe.

"You have no place here, surface-dweller."

I met his gaze, unwavering.

"I seek an audience with your King."

The Duergar guard scoffed.

"You'll find his axe in your skull, not his time wasted on a beardless surface rat."

I crossed my arms.

"You killed Baryn Stonevein. That means I have business with your King."

The words hit like a hammer, their silence stretched thick.

Then, after a long pause, the lead guard muttered, "Come with us."

The city of the Duergar lay deeper than Karad'Thul's oldest halls, carved into the bones of the mountain itself.

Great pillars rose from underground lakes, their dark spires burning with eerie green flames.

At its heart stood the Black Keep of Dûm'Zarak, where King Durnakh the Bitter ruled from his throne of rusted iron and basalt.

I was led before him, my footsteps echoing in the great chamber.

He sat upon his dark throne, his aged face twisted in scorn, his gray beard streaked with molten silver.

His red eyes fixed on me.

"You surface-dwellers are persistent, I'll give you that," he rumbled.

I said nothing, waiting.

A slow, cruel grin spread across his face.

"You've come about the envoy."

I nodded. "Aye."

Durnakh leaned forward, resting one arm on the hilt of the great sword at his side.

"You stand in our city, Gimil Ironborn, beneath halls that once belonged to us. And you ask why one envoy was killed?"

His voice dropped lower, darker.

"You should be asking why we have not taken back what was ours."

I clenched my jaw. "Karad'Thul was built centuries ago—"

"ON STOLEN STONE!" Durnakh's voice boomed, rattling the very pillars of his throne room.

I stood firm.

He leaned back, exhaling through his crooked teeth, his voice settling into something colder.

"Do not concern yourself with one dead envoy," he muttered. "Worry about when we finally decide to march on your gates."

Silence stretched between us.

Then I spoke.

"I didn’t come here to start a war," I said. "I came to stop one."

Durnakh’s eyes narrowed.

"I know what happened to the envoy. I know why you did it," I continued. "And I promise you, I won’t tell the King."

The Duergar lord studied me, the firelight flickering against his steel-ringed fingers.

Then, to my surprise, he laughed.

"A wise dwarf, after all," he mused. "Perhaps there’s hope for your kind yet."

He gestured lazily to his guards.

"Take him back to the tunnels. Let him leave unharmed."

Then he grinned, his teeth sharp as steel.

"For now."

I left Dûm’Zarak with my life, my answer, and my silence. But the tunnels did not let me go so easily.

I had just passed the old mining tunnels, near where the Duergar machines toiled away, when I felt it— The air shifted. A shiver ran down my spine.Then came the chittering. I turned, and from the shadows of the tunnel, they came.

Four Vhraal. Their limbs too long, their mouths too wide, their eyes gleaming with malicious hunger.

I cursed, drawing my blade. There was no running. I had to fight.

The first Vhraal lunged, its clawed fingers raking the air. I barely managed to dodge, my blade flashing out, striking its side— The wound sealed instantly, the flesh knitting together before my eyes. Damn it.

Another came from the side, its jaw unhinging, rows of needle-thin teeth snapping toward my throat. I ducked, driving my elbow into its ribs, forcing it back— Only for the third Vhraal to tackle me from behind. I crashed into the stone, my vision blurring, my body aching.

They were strong. Too strong. I gritted my teeth, pushing up.

I would not die in the dark.

I grabbed a torch from my belt, flipping it onto my blade. The flames roared, licking up the steel. The Vhraal hesitated. I struck.

I drove my flaming sword into the first, its scream ripping through the tunnels, its body igniting like dry paper.

I turned, slashing into the second, then the third, their forms twisting and convulsing, their shrieks fading into nothing.

When the last one collapsed, the air was still again. I stood, my breath ragged, my body bruised.

And then, without another word, I walked back toward Karad'Thul. I had a promise to keep.

Creatures of the Deep

The summons came at dawn, a sealed parchment delivered by one of the King's personal guards. Another attack in the mines. Eight dead. Torn apart. Eaten.

There was no mistaking the pattern. Something in the deep was hunting dwarves.

And now, King Thrain Stonehelm had ordered a hunt of his own.

The throne room was grim, its torches burning low, casting long shadows over the assembled advisors and guildmasters.

King Thrain stood at the center, his hands clasped behind his back, his jaw set like iron.

"You know why I've called you," he said. I nodded. "Aye." "The creatures must be found and destroyed. We cannot let the deep consume more of our people."

His eyes locked onto mine. "This time, I entrust this mission to you. Gather a party, arm them well, and see it done." I exhaled, rolling my shoulders. "Then I'll need to gear up."

I went to the King's Guard Armory, where the best-forged weapons and armor of Karad'Thul were kept. This was no small expedition. This was war against the horrors of the deep.

I ran my hands over the weapons, picking what I needed. A thick dwarven steel breastplate, reinforced with runic carvings, resistant to corruption and acid. A heavy cloak of chain mail, to guard against the jaws and claws of the creatures below. Steel-plated boots, designed for fighting in tight quarters and uneven terrain. A helm with a visor, enchanted by the King's Rune-masters to give low-light vision in the tunnels. A short sword, sharp and balanced, meant for quick slashes in close combat. A warhammer, heavy but not unwieldy—perfect for

crushing skulls and breaking through armor. Throwing axes, strapped to my belt, for when the fight turned chaotic.

Once I was armed, I turned to assemble the party.

I rode to the Warriors' Guild, the familiar halls bustling with mercenaries, veterans, and young bloods eager for battle.

At the center of the guild stood Borik and Umur, already deep in an arm-wrestling match, yelling drunken bets at each other.

I stepped in, slamming my gauntlet on the table. "We've got a hunt. The King's orders." They both looked up. Umur grinned, cracking his knuckles. "Good. I was getting bored." Borik simply stood, rolling his shoulders. "How many are we taking?" "Ten in total," I said.

I picked the best of the best—six more warriors from the guild, each tested in battle and blood.

Together, we stood at the entrance to the Deep Roads, ready to descend.

We had to pass through Duergar territory to get deeper into the caverns. That was always a problem. The Duergar had tolerated me before, but a fully armed war party of dwarves? They weren't going to let us through peacefully.

As we entered their mining tunnels, the atmosphere changed.

I knew it wouldn't be long before the guards arrived. And sure enough— Eight Duergar warriors stepped into our path, their red eyes gleaming, their weapons already drawn.

At their center stood something far worse. A Duergar Automaton Guard. Its massive frame made of enchanted black iron, its arms ending in curved blades, its eyes glowing with eerie, mechanical intelligence.

The captain of the Duergar warriors stepped forward, his axe resting on his shoulder. "You should have turned back, Ironborn."

I tightened my grip on my sword. "We're just passing through." "You're passing through armed for war." I sighed. "This doesn't have to end in blood."

The captain smiled. "Everything does." And then he swung his axe.

The fight erupted in an instant. The Duergar warriors charged, their blades flashing, their shields crashing against ours.

I blocked the first strike, pivoting and slamming my warhammer into a Duergar's ribs, hearing the sickening crack of bone. Umur roared, cutting through one enemy, his blade dripping red as he twisted into another. Borik swung his two-handed axe, cleaving through a Duergar's skull, his expression cold, focused.

The Automaton Guard moved forward, its massive blade-arm swinging. I barely had time to duck, the metal slicing just inches from my head. Damn it.

I rolled forward, gripping a throwing axe, and hurled it into its chest— The blade barely scratched the enchanted steel. "FALL BACK!" I shouted.

We split apart, forcing the Automaton to divide its attention. I grabbed one of the mining torches, shoving it beneath the Automaton's shoulder joint. The flames licked at its gears, and for a moment, it staggered, its movements slowing.

That was all we needed. Borik swung his great axe, striking the weak point— And the Automaton shuddered, collapsing in a heap of smoking metal.

The last Duergar warrior fell, his blade slipping from his grip, his blood pooling onto the stone.

We stood there, panting, victorious. "Let's keep moving," I muttered. We had bigger monsters to fight. We left the bodies behind, stepping beyond the Duergar tunnels, into the true depths. Where no light had ever touched. Where the creatures of the deep waited. We moved in formation, our torches flickering, our weapons ready.

The air grew colder as we ventured deeper into the tunnels.

Every step took us further from the surface, further from the light.

Only the flickering glow of our torches kept the blackness at bay, but even that felt weak against the weight of the abyss.

I could hear the dripping of unseen water, the shifting of distant rock, but most of all…

I could feel something watching.

The tunnel widened into a cavern, a vast underground space where the stone had been smoothed unnaturally, as if worn away by something other than time.

I raised my fist, signaling the party to halt.

Something was wrong. The air had changed. It carried a whisper—a dozen voices speaking all at once, overlapping in a dreadful, rasping song.

The words were incomprehensible, a language not meant to be spoken. And then I saw it.

A shadow moved at the far end of the chamber, its body too large, too wrong.

It lurched forward, its skin sagging, its ribcage pulsing as if it were still alive despite its decay.

Its face was a gaping void, an endless mouth from which the stolen voices poured.

A Hollowed King. The party tensed, weapons raised. And then, it moved. Fast.

The Hollowed King lunged, its many-clawed hands reaching toward us in a jerking, unnatural movement, as if its own body resisted it.

I barely had time to raise my shield before it slammed into me, knocking me back with inhuman strength.

I crashed against the stone, my ears ringing, my breath stolen. "FORM UP!" Borik roared. The party moved, surrounding the massive horror, their weapons flashing in the torchlight.

Steel met rotting flesh. And then the real nightmare began.

The Hollowed King did not fight like a beast. It fought like a thousand unseen things, each limb moving independently, each strike unpredictable. One of its many-fingered hands grabbed a warrior, Durnik, lifting him effortlessly.

Durnik screamed, his armor crumpling like parchment as the creature crushed him.

I lunged, driving my warhammer into its arm with all my strength.

The bone splintered. But the arm did not fall. Instead, the Hollowed King simply twisted, and I felt something cold crawl up my spine.

The whispers from its mouth grew louder. They weren't words. They were pulling at something inside me. My memories. My fears. I gritted my teeth, shaking off the sensation. Not today.

Durnik struggled, his axe swinging wildly, but it bounced harmlessly off the Hollowed King’s flesh.

The creature tilted its head, as if curious, and then its chest cavity opened.

Inside was nothing but a swirling, shifting void. Durnik’s screams vanished as he was dragged inside. And then—the chest closed again.

Like he had never been there. "NO!" One of the warriors roared, charging wildly.

I grabbed him, yanking him back. "FOCUS! WE KILL IT OR WE JOIN HIM!"

The rage in his eyes faded into horror, but he nodded. We fought on. We began to coordinate.

Umur slashed at its legs, forcing it to stumble. Borik, roaring with pure fury, cleaved into its side, sending black ichor spraying across the cavern walls. I drove my warhammer into its jaw, cracking the bone-like structure, making its whispers falter.

It twisted and convulsed, its movements breaking apart, as if the many voices within were screaming, tearing at themselves. And then— It collapsed. The chamber fell into silence. And for a moment, we thought we had won. Then the chittering came.

From the shadows of the cavern, six Vhraal emerged—their sinewy bodies glistening, their eyes empty of anything but hunger. But worse— Behind them came something far larger.

A massive, bloated spider, its legs the size of spears, its black carapace slick with dripping venom. It let out a shrill, inhuman shriek.

The warriors barely had time to catch their breath before the monsters attacked.

The Vhraal were fast. Faster than us. They darted between our ranks, their needle-teeth slicing into flesh, their claws raking against armor.

One warrior fell, his throat torn out in an instant. Another cried out as venomous fangs sank into his arm, the poison burning like fire.

I swung my flaming sword, catching a Vhraal across the back, its flesh igniting. It screeched, convulsing, but it did not die fast enough.

From the corner of my eye, I saw the spider rear up, its bloated body pulsating, and then— It spat a web. The sticky mass struck two warriors, trapping them instantly.

I charged, hacking at the webbing, but it was too thick, too strong. The spider moved in for the kill.

And then Borik roared, his great axe flashing as he cleaved one of its legs clean off. The creature shrieked, stumbling backward, venom dripping onto the cavern floor.

We fought desperately, every warrior bleeding, wounded, exhausted.

The last Vhraal leapt toward Umur, but he met it with his sword, splitting it in two. The spider screeched, thrashing as Borik struck it again, this time burying his axe into its skull. It shuddered. And then, finally, it collapsed. The cavern fell silent once more. The battle was over.

I stood there, my chest rising and falling, my sword dripping with blood.

I looked around at my warriors. Wounded. Bleeding. One dead. Durnik was gone. Swallowed by something not meant to exist. I clenched my jaw, stepping toward his fallen weapon. I picked it up, staring at its bloodied handle. Another name to add to the dead. Another friend lost to the darkness.

I turned back to the others. "We press on," I said. No one argued. We were warriors. And the hunt was not over yet.

The air turned foul as we pushed deeper into the tunnels, the once-natural caverns giving way to something unnatural, wrong.

The stone beneath our boots was slick, not with water, but with something thicker, more organic.

A damp stench of rot and old blood filled the narrow passage, a smell that no dwarven mine should ever hold.

I could feel it now.

The wrongness.

And when we stepped into the first chamber, we saw why.

Slimy, pulsating pods lined the walls, thick strands of black mucus dripping from their bloated shapes.

Some were small, the size of a dwarf's head. Others… others were as large as a man, their surfaces stretching and writhing, as if something inside was still dreaming.

Umur grunted, stepping forward. "What in the deepest hells is this?"

The pods pulsed.

Their inner fluid sloshed as we approached, a sickly glow barely visible within. Umur didn't hesitate. He drew his dagger, stepped to the nearest pod, and sliced it open. With a wet, squelching noise, the cocoon split apart, spilling dark, glistening bile onto the stone floor.

And then—

A Vhraal fell out.

The creature lay twitching, its flesh still raw and pulsing, its milky eyes fluttering open as if it had been dreaming.

It let out a weak, wet chitter, struggling to move— I drove my boot into its skull, crushing it before it could rise.

The room fell silent. We turned to the other pods. There were dozens. Some were already split open. The Vhraal… they weren't just appearing in the depths. They were being made.

And whoever was doing this had been at it for a long time.

The room beyond the pods was filled with crates and tables, covered in strange alchemical vials, dark powders, and old scrolls.

I stepped closer, picking up a tattered book, its pages filled with runes I didn't recognize.

Borik picked up a sealed jar, peering inside.

"These… these are mushrooms," he muttered. "But not the kind we eat."

The herbs, powders, and extracts we found were unfamiliar, but they reeked of dark magic.

And the more we searched, the more we found.

Someone had been experimenting down here.

Breeding monsters.

And they weren’t done yet.

Through a narrow passageway, we entered another chamber, this one lined with bookshelves, arcane sigils burned into the walls, and a massive iron cauldron filled with something black and bubbling.

At the far end of the room, beneath a stone-carved altar, lay a Duergar necromancer, his body wrapped in dark robes, his face hidden beneath a hood, snoring softly.

The bastard was sleeping.

Umur and I exchanged a glance.

I stepped forward and kicked him in the ribs.

The Duergar gasped awake, scrambling up with wild, bloodshot eyes.

But before he could react, I grabbed him by the throat, slamming him against the wall.

His black-stained teeth gnashed, his hands clawing weakly at my wrist.

"Talk." I growled. "What in the deepest pits are you doing down here?"

His eyes flickered with panic.

And then, to my surprise, he spoke.

"We are—*"he gasped,* "we are only seekers of the dark’s truth!"

I squeezed tighter. "The Vhraal. You’re making them."

His face twisted.

"They are not ours, not entirely—we… we only improved them. Strengthened them."

"Why?"

His lips trembled, then he begged.

"Don’t—don’t tell our King!" he wheezed. "This is not his doing. We are… a separate clan, our own believers. If he knew—if he knew—he’d have us all flayed alive."

My jaw clenched. The Duergar King, Durnakh, had nothing to do with this.

This was a rogue sect, using dark magic and experimentation to turn the Vhraal into something worse.

I released him, letting him collapse to his knees.

"You should have let me sleep," he rasped. That was when we heard it.

A low humming. A chorus of voices. We turned sharply, weapons drawn.

From the chamber beyond, we could see the flickering glow of red torches.

And we could hear them. The Duergar cultists. Praying.

We moved slowly, peering into the next chamber. There, in the center of the stone floor, a massive demonic seal had been drawn in blood.

Twelve Duergar figures stood in a ring, hands clasped, their heads bowed as they chanted in low, guttural voices.

Their prayer was ancient, crawling beneath my skin like a thousand spiders.

"Zhurm'kal vel'darak, ashna k'hural, brath'durok!"
"By the blood of the fallen, by the will of the abyss, we offer the gift of flesh."
"Karth'aash, jhurak-mor, thren'duul!"
"Take from us your vessel, rise from the depths, consume the weak!"

In the center of the demonic seal, something twitched.

A mass of flesh, black and wet, shifting like it was trying to take shape.

A new Vhraal. Being born.

I gritted my teeth. Not today. "Kill them," I growled.

We rushed forward, our weapons flashing in the torchlight, our boots thundering across the stone floor.

The cultists barely had time to react before our blades met flesh.

Borik swung his great axe, cleaving through two at once, their bodies collapsing in a heap. Umur's blade pierced the gut of another, the Duergar choking as he collapsed onto the bloody sigil.

But then— The necromancer screeched, rising from behind us, his hands glowing with foul magic. A wave of black energy rushed over us, and suddenly—

I felt my strength leave my limbs. I staggered, my sword feeling ten times heavier. The others groaned, clutching their chests, their bodies withering as the spell drained them.

The necromancer laughed.

"Your souls are mine, surface-dwellers!"

I gritted my teeth, forcing my body to move through the pain. "Not today." I grabbed a throwing axe from my belt—and hurled it. The blade spun through the air, striking the necromancer square in the chest.

His laughter turned to a gasp. Then— He collapsed.The magic faded. And with renewed strength—we finished the cult.

The room was silent. The demonic sigil was smeared with blood, ruined. I exhaled, wiping my blade clean.

The air grew colder as we pressed deeper into the tunnels, our boots crunching over loose gravel and scattered bones.

The stone corridors twisted and forked, the path ahead shifting like a maze, each turn leading into darker and more unfamiliar territory.

Borik muttered under his breath, holding his torch high.

"This place is a damned maze."

I agreed.

Even as a seasoned miner, I could feel how unnatural these tunnels were.

Something had dug them—not for ore, not for purpose, but for hunger.

And we were walking straight into its mouth.

Then we smelled it.

A thick, rancid stench, so foul it clawed at the back of our throats, a mix of rotting meat, unwashed flesh, and filth.

The torches flickered.

And then, we saw the lair.

The cavern before us was massive—at least thirty feet wide, the walls slick with slime and soot, the ceiling dripping with condensation.

At the far end of the chamber, hunched over a massive stone slab, sat the ogre.

A Deep Ogre.

A beast of the Underdark, far larger than any normal ogre, its skin pale and cracked like old stone, its muscles thick as boulders, its eyes glinting faintly with predatory awareness.

It was filthy, covered in patchy, coarse hair, its stomach distended from years of consuming whatever fell into its grasp.

And it was not alone.

Scattered around the chamber were at least a dozen goblins, all chained together with crude iron links.

They were filthy, scarred, and broken, their clothes no more than rags, their bodies covered in lash marks.

Some were tending to a bubbling cauldron, stirring a grotesque stew of bones and mystery meat over a foul fire.

Others cowered in the shadows, trembling, waiting for their next command.

And one lay dead in the corner, its body twisted unnaturally, its skull caved in.

The Ogre muttered to itself, its voice deep and slurred, almost like it was half-drunk, half-mad.

"Work faster, you little maggots, or I'll grind yer bones for my soup!"

It lashed out with a thick, barbed whip, the leather snapping against a goblin’s back with a sickening crack.

The goblin yelped, dropping its ladle into the pot, scrambling to recover.

The Ogre grunted, adjusting its weight, letting out a foul, thunderous fart that echoed off the cavern walls.

A few goblins gagged, but none dared react further.

The goblins moved frantically, trying to stay ahead of the Ogre’s cruel temper.

One approached hesitantly, carrying a crude wooden platter stacked with some kind of meat —raw, slimy, unidentifiable.

The Ogre snatched it, shoving entire handfuls into its maw, chewing with obnoxious wet smacks.

Bits of flesh and gristle dribbled down its chin, and when it finished, it let out a groaning belch, spitting chewed cartilage onto the floor.

One goblin, smaller than the rest, tentatively stepped forward.

"M-master, the stew is almost ready…" The Ogre’s bloodshot eyes flicked toward it.

Then, with frightening speed, it grabbed the goblin by the leg and swung it against the cavern wall.

The sound of bone snapping echoed through the chamber. The goblin twitched, gasping for breath, before going still. The others lowered their heads, not reacting. This was their normal.

The Ogre grunted, picking its teeth with one of its filthy, splintered nails.

"I didn’t like his voice."

Then it let out a guttural chuckle, as if this was just another night of entertainment. In the darker part of the cavern, we spotted something else. A Duergar corpse, slumped against the far wall, its skull split open, dried blood pooling around its gray flesh. His armor was ornate, more refined than the ones we'd fought before.

"One of their leaders?" Umur muttered.

"Maybe his former master," I whispered back. I had seen Deep Ogres before. Most of them were mercenaries, brutes that Duergar or Drow used as muscle.But sometimes… Sometimes, they broke free. And when they did—they turned on their masters.

Judging by the way the corpse was tossed aside, ignored… This Ogre had done just that. And now, it was its own master. The King of its own filth-ridden domain.

We stayed hidden, watching, listening.

The Ogre continued eating, occasionally grumbling to itself, sometimes laughing at nothing, other times grabbing a goblin and shaking it violently before tossing it away.

Then—It grunted, shifting its weight.

And what came next was something none of us were prepared for.

It grabbed one of the goblins, a frail, terrified thing, and pulled it close. The goblin trembled, whimpering. It tried to pull away. The Ogre’s grip tightened and then it started raping the goblin.

A wave of disgust, fury, and revulsion rippled through us.

My fingers curled into fists. Borik muttered a curse under his breath. Umur’s grip on his sword hilt tightened.

I felt the rage boil inside me, my blood burning hotter than any forge. This thing—this creature—was filth.

And it needed to die.

"We end this," I whispered. "But we do it right." Umur cracked his knuckles, rolling his shoulders. Borik spat onto the floor, nodding.

The other warriors were silent, but their faces were hard as stone.

We stepped out of the shadows, weapons in hand, boots grinding against the cavern floor.

The goblins froze, their sunken, fearful eyes darting between us and their massive, grotesque master.

The Deep Ogre turned, its massive bulk shifting, and for the first time, we saw its face clearly.

A twisted mound of flesh, its pale skin pockmarked with scars, its yellowed tusks protruding from cracked lips, its bloodshot eyes gleaming with something not quite madness, but not far from it either.

It grunted, wiping filth and old meat from its mouth, regarding us with mild amusement.

And then it spoke.

"Well now." The Ogre let out a long, slow croaking laugh. "What's this? More little dwarves come to crawl in my tunnels?"

The goblins lowered their heads, trembling. They knew what came next.

I didn't move.

I stared up at the mass of pale, scarred flesh, my grip firm on my warhammer.

"You have quite the kingdom down here," I said. "With all your slaves and filth."

The Ogre snorted, picking its teeth with a jagged nail.

"Slaves?" It chuckled, then grabbed a goblin by the arm and yanked it up, holding it in the air.

The goblin squealed, kicking.

"These aren't slaves," the Ogre sneered. "They're just my little pets."

It casually tossed the goblin aside, sending the small creature sprawling across the cavern floor.

Then its gaze flicked to the Duergar corpse in the corner.

The Ogre grinned. "Now, that was a master. A real bastard of a thing." It leaned forward, spitting on the corpse. "Here's your master."

It laughed, a deep, awful gurgling noise.

Then it whipped a goblin across the back, sending the poor creature shrieking into the corner.

"So, tell me, dwarf-shits," the Ogre croaked loudly, still laughing, "What are you looking for in my lair?"

I met its gaze, my expression hard. "Don't call us that, you freak." The laughter stopped. The Ogre's sneer vanished. For a moment, the cavern was silent. Then, its massive hands tightened into fists, its knuckles cracking like breaking bones. "You shouldn't have said that," it muttered, its voice a low growl.

Then its fingers moved, weaving a crude gesture of dark magic. The chains around the goblins snapped open. The goblins hesitated. The Ogre snarled. "Fight, you maggots! Or I'll eat you myself!"

The goblins turned to us, their eyes filled with fear—but also desperation.

Then, with shrill, warbling screams, they charged. The battle had begun.

The first goblins rushed forward, their rusty blades flashing, their voices filled with shrieks and curses.

I met the first one head-on, parrying its dagger, then caving its ribs in with a hammer blow.

It collapsed, gasping, blood spilling from its lips.

To my right, Umur roared, hacking through two goblins in one swing, his blade carving them apart like meat. Borik swung his great axe, catching a goblin in mid-air and splitting it from shoulder to gut.

Blood sprayed, the scent of iron thick in the air. But the Ogre wasn't waiting.

The massive brute let out a roar, grabbing a crude metal club the size of a small tree. It swung it low, forcing three of us to dive out of the way. The club slammed into the stone, shattering rock, sending debris flying. A goblin got caught in the swing—crushed instantly, its body pulped beyond recognition. The Ogre grinned. Then it turned to me. "You wanted a fight, dwarf?"

It charged. The Ogre was fast for its size. It swung its club down, aiming to pulverize me into the dirt.

I rolled aside, feeling the air rush past me, the sheer force of the impact shaking the cavern. I came up, swinging my warhammer, striking it across the ribs.

The Ogre barely flinched.

It backhanded me, its massive fist slamming into my chest like a boulder. Pain exploded in my ribs. I staggered back, gasping, struggling to stay on my feet. Then the goblins swarmed again. The battlefield was madness.

Fifteen goblins, darting in and out, their blades flashing, their teeth bared in snarling frenzy. One jumped onto Umur's back, biting into his shoulder. He roared, grabbing the goblin by the head and slamming it into the stone floor until it stopped moving.

Borik fought three at once, his axe a whirlwind of blood and steel.

A goblin lunged for me—I grabbed it by the throat, swung it around, and used its body as a shield as another goblin stabbed forward.

The blade sank into its kin's chest.

I threw the dying goblin aside, kicking the second one in the stomach, sending it sprawling.

The Ogre was laughing, swinging wildly, crushing anything in its path. I knew we couldn't keep this up. We had to finish it.

"Borik! Umur! With me!" I roared.The two broke away from the goblins, falling in line.

The Ogre turned, confused—then furious. "What are you planning, dwarf?!"

I didn’t answer.

We charged. Ten warriors, one beast. Umur feinted left, forcing the Ogre to turn. Borik swung his axe low, cleaving into the Ogre’s calf, severing muscle.

The Ogre roared, stumbling. I jumped, climbing onto its back, my warhammer raised.

And then— I brought it down. Straight into its skull. The Ogre shuddered, its body going rigid. For a moment, it stood, swaying.

Then, like a falling boulder, it collapsed forward, slamming into the cavern floor. The impact shook the tunnel, dust raining down from above. Silence fell.

The remaining goblins froze, their eyes wide with terror. And then— They fled. Scattering into the tunnels, their chains clinking as they vanished into the dark.

I took a long breath, stepping off the Ogre’s twitching corpse.

The stench of the fallen Ogre still clung to my armor as we pressed deeper into the twisting tunnels.

We had lost one warrior already, and the others were exhausted, their faces hard and silent, their armor scratched and bloodied.

But we couldn’t turn back now.

Something worse was still down here.

And it was waiting for us.

The tunnels began to change.

The rough, natural caverns gave way to stone-carved walls, the marks of ancient tools evident on the surfaces.

"This wasn’t dug by us," Borik murmured, running his hand along the stone. "Someone built this."

Not just someone. Duergar.

And sure enough, as we rounded a bend in the passage, we found them.

A small band of Duergar explorers, five in total, stood in the next chamber.

They froze as soon as they saw us, their weapons flashing out in an instant.

For a long moment, we stared at each other, the tension thick as steel.

Then one of them, their leader, a broad-shouldered Duergar in dark iron armor, took a slow step forward.

His hand rested on his war pick, but he did not raise it.

"You're far from your surface halls, Ironborn," he said, his voice gravelly.

"And you're a bit far from Dûm'Zarak," I shot back.

The Duergar exchanged glances with their own.

Then one of his men spoke. "Something's down here. We've lost two already." A chill crept up my spine. Before I could respond, the air changed. The tunnel around us went deathly silent.

And then, we heard them. A sound like wet, slithering flesh dragging against the stone. Low, unnatural clicking noises, followed by a horrible, gurgling hiss.

And before we could react— The Mawborn attacked. They came from above, from the ceilings, from the walls.

Leech-like creatures, their flesh stretched thin, their coiling organs visible beneath their pale, translucent skin.

Their mouths unhinged, stretching from their chin to their chest, spiraling with endless rows of needle-thin teeth.

They did not see us. They heard us. They heard our breathing. Our heartbeats. And they came for them.

One of the Mawborn lunged, moving with horrific speed, its limbs twisting unnaturally as it darted across the ceiling.

I barely had time to raise my shield before it dropped onto me, its slimy skin pressing against my armor, its gaping mouth stretching open.

I shoved my warhammer into its throat, forcing it back, twisting my body to slam it against the wall.

It screeched, black bile spraying from its mouth, its body convulsing like a dying eel.

Then, with a single brutal strike, I caved in its skull. But there were more. So many more. The chamber exploded into violence.

One Mawborn latched onto a Duergar warrior, its teeth sinking into his shoulder, tearing flesh like paper.

The warrior screamed, but before it could drag him away, Borik swung his axe, severing the creature in half, sending its writhing corpse twitching across the cavern floor.

Umur let out a battle cry, dodging left as one of the Mawborn lunged at him, missing by inches.

He retaliated with a brutal upward slash, gutting it from belly to throat, spilling wet, sloshing entrails onto the ground.

A second Mawborn came from behind, its claws sinking into his back.

I heard Umur's snarl of pain, but before it could finish him, a Duergar warrior—one of their archers—fired a crossbow bolt straight into its skull.

For a moment, we weren't enemies.

We were survivors.

And if we didn't fight together, we wouldn't be anything at all.

We formed a circle, back to back, our weapons flashing as the Mawborn surrounded us.

"HOLD!" I roared, slamming my warhammer into another creature, feeling its bones crunch beneath the impact.

The Duergar leader fought beside me, his war pick flashing, taking down two more of the monsters.

Borik, swinging his great axe in wild arcs, cleaved through one, then another, blood splattering his face.

But the Mawborn just kept coming. I could hear the walls shifting. More of them were crawling from the depths. We couldn't win this. Not like this. "FALL BACK!" I shouted.

The Duergar leader grunted. "Where?!" I looked behind us—toward the narrowest part of the tunnel. "Bottleneck them! Get to the passage!"

The warriors moved, retreating toward the tight corridor, forcing the Mawborn into a single point of attack.

The first of them rushed in—and was cut down instantly.Another. Then another. And finally, their screeching died down. The few that remained slithered back into the dark, realizing they had lost the fight.

Silence settled in. The battle was over. We stood there, panting, bleeding, battered. For a long moment, neither side spoke. Then the Duergar leader sighed, wiping blood from his face. "You fight well." I nodded. "You too."

One of the Duergar warriors chuckled dryly, still clutching his bleeding arm. "Strange, fighting alongside surface-dwellers." "Stranger things have happened," Borik muttered.

The Duergar leader grunted, considering. Then he turned to me. "We go our way. You go yours. But if we meet again…" I expected a threat.

Instead— "Perhaps we won't need to kill each other." I smiled. "Maybe." And with that, we parted.

Not as friends. But not as enemies either. Just as dwarves who survived the dark.

The tunnels stretched wider, the air stale and cold, carrying a damp rot that clung to our skin.

We had fought too much, seen too much—but we weren't done yet.

Not until we found the nest. And when we did… I almost wished we hadn't.

The cavern opened before us, massive—like a forgotten cathedral of stone, its ceiling lost in darkness above.

And below… Vhraal. Hundreds.

Their twisting, eel-like bodies lay tangled together, their pale, pulsing skin glistening in the dim torchlight. Most were in hibernation, their gaping, spiraled maws twitching as they dreamed of hunger and blood. The air was thick with them, the very walls coated in a black, fleshy substance, as if the stone itself had become their hive.

Umur exhaled sharply, gripping his sword. "This… is too many." Borik looked around, his face grim. "If they wake up, we're all dead."

I reached for my belt. "We're not waking them up." The party pulled out flasks of fire oil. "We're burning them."

We moved slowly, our boots careful on the stone.

Each of us uncorked flasks, dousing the nest in black, viscous oil, soaking their twitching bodies, letting the stench of fuel fill the cavern.

Some shifted in their sleep, their long fingers twitching, but they did not wake.

We spread the fire oil wide, making sure no part of the nest would escape the flames.

Then, when the last flask was emptied, I stepped forward, holding my torch.

For a moment, I hesitated. Then, without a word, I dropped it. The fire spread instantly.

The Vhraal awoke in agony.

Flames roared across the cavern, licking up the walls, racing through their flesh-built hive.

Screeches filled the air—a shrill, piercing, unnatural wail, the sound of a hundred horrors realizing their end had come.

Their bodies twisted, writhing as they tried to escape the flames, but it was too late.

Some collapsed immediately, their skin peeling away in sheets, their bones cracking from the heat.

Others thrashed violently, their elongated limbs reaching out, but there was nowhere to go.

The cavern became an inferno, and we stepped back, watching as the nest was consumed.

But not all of them died. Some escaped the fire. And they came for us.

Fifteen of them burst from the flames, their bodies half-burned, their flesh blackened and peeling, but their hunger untouched.

They came at us crawling along the ceiling, skittering on all fours, their gnashing teeth glinting with fresh hate.

I raised my warhammer, ready for one last fight.

The first Vhraal lunged at Borik, its clawed fingers raking at his chestplate.

He roared, driving his great axe into its gut, splitting it in half in a single swing.

Another latched onto a warrior, its fangs sinking into his neck.

The dwarf screamed, but before it could drag him away, Umur ripped the thing off and crushed its skull against the wall.

A third landed on me, its limbs wrapping around my body, its mouth opening wide, ready to bite.

I gritted my teeth, grabbing its jaw with both hands, and with a mighty heave, I tore it apart.

But they kept coming.

One of the warriors was overwhelmed, his body dragged to the ground, his screams cut short as the Vhraal tore him apart.

Blood splattered the cavern floor, but we couldn’t stop to mourn.

We had to finish this.

The cavern was chaos, the smell of burning flesh and spilled blood filling the air.

A half-burned Vhraal lashed out at me—I dodged left, pivoting before swinging my warhammer directly into its temple.

Its skull split like brittle rock, its body collapsing into a twitching heap.

The last of the surviving Vhraal screeched, its body shaking, its hunger turning to fear.

It tried to flee. Borik threw his axe. The blade spun through the air— And buried itself in the Vhraal's back. It collapsed, dead. The battle was over.

We stood there, panting, bleeding, exhausted. But we had won. The nest was gone. And for now… The mines were safe.

I looked at the burning corpses, the smoke curling toward the ceiling like a funeral pyre.

"This should lessen them for a while," I muttered, wiping blood from my brow.

I turned to the others. "They must have been the cause of the attacks in the mines." Borik spat on the burning remains. "Good. Let the bastards burn."

With that, we turned, walking away from the flames, back toward the surface. The journey back to Karad'Thul was long. We climbed through the tunnels, past the ruins of battles fought, past the bodies we left behind. When we finally reached the surface, the warmth of torches and the scent of fresh stonework was almost foreign.

The High Council was waiting.

King Thrain Stonehelm sat upon his great throne, his expression hard, unreadable.

I stepped forward. "The nest is gone," I reported. "We burned them. The attacks should decrease now."

The Council murmured amongst themselves, nodding.

The King studied me, his sharp gray eyes piercing into mine. Then, he nodded. "You have done Karad'Thul a great service," he said. "The mines will remember this day."

I exhaled, feeling the weight of exhaustion settle into my bones. It was over. For now.

Whispers in the Darkness

The halls of Dûm'Zarak had always been cold, carved from the deepest black stone, illuminated only by the eerie glow of green-veined torches.

But now, the cold had become something else. Something alive. Something speaking. And only one dwarf could hear it.

King Durnakh the Bitter sat alone in his chamber, his great iron throne looming over the dimly lit room.

The air was thick with smoke, the scent of burning herbs and coal swirling in the damp air.

His hands rested on the armrests of his throne, his fingers twitching as he tried to block out the whispers.

But they never stopped.

Never left him alone.

"You are weak, Durnakh."

His jaw clenched, his teeth grinding together.

The voice was not his own.

It was low, guttural, ancient—a whisper that slithered through his mind like a parasite.

He closed his red Duergar eyes, trying to push it away.

"You sit upon a throne of dust, ruling over NOTHING."

"You let the SURFACE DWARVES steal your ancestors' home."

His fingers tightened on the throne.

“Silence,” he growled.

But the whisper laughed.

"Silence?"

"You would silence ME? After all I have given you?"

Durnakh’s breath came short, his muscles tense.

"What are you?" he muttered.

"I am the rightful voice of your blood."

"I am the whisper in your veins, the fire in your ancestors' bones."

"You have FAILED them, Durnakh."

The King’s hands trembled.

"I have built Dûm’Zarak into a fortress. I have expanded our reach, I—"

"And yet, Karad’Thul remains in their hands."

The whisper hissed, its words coiling around his thoughts like chains.

"Your fathers bled for those halls. Your ancestors DIED in those halls."

"And you do NOTHING."

Durnakh stood suddenly, his iron boots clanging against the stone.

His breath was heavy, his mind spinning.

"I am a King," he snarled. "I am not a puppet to whispers in the dark."

"Then prove it."

The whisper lingered, slithering deeper into his mind.

"TAKE BACK WHAT IS YOURS."

The whispers did not stop. Days turned to weeks. Weeks turned to months. And King Durnakh became something else. His council grew afraid to speak with him. His warriors avoided his gaze.

He would wake in the night, drenched in cold sweat, his hands shaking, his mind filled with visions of fire and war.

He no longer ate properly, no longer slept without hearing the voice.

And finally, one evening, standing alone in his dark throne room, he whispered back.

"How?"

"You already know the way."

"Gather your legions. Raise your banners. March through the mines, and STRIKE Karad'Thul from within."

"End the surface dwarves, and take back what is RIGHTFULLY YOURS."

Durnakh shivered, his hands clenching into fists. The voice was right. Karad'Thul had once belonged to his ancestors. The surface dwarves had stolen it. And he would steal it back.

The orders were sent. Messengers carried word to the far reaches of Dûm'Zarak. The entire underground kingdom stirred, an army rising from the shadows. The war for Karad'Thul had begun.

Deep within the mountain halls, thousands of Duergar warriors gathered in vast mustering chambers, their armor clanking as they prepared for battle. Legion captains shouted orders, organizing the troops into formations. Smiths worked tirelessly, forging black iron weapons, their hammers echoing through the caverns. Enchanters carved runes into shields and blades, infusing them with dark energy. Beastmasters chained war-beasts, massive underground lizards and armored drakelings, ready to be unleashed. Siege engineers constructed iron rams and tunneling machines, preparing for the attack through the mines.

The Duergar were not coming as raiders.

They were coming as a conquering army.

Durnakh stood atop a high stone balcony, overlooking his gathered legions. Beside him, his warlords awaited orders. He raised a hand, and the chamber fell silent. His voice boomed across the hall. "Karad'Thul belongs to the Duergar!"

A roar of approval echoed through the ranks.

"We take it from within. We strike through the tunnels."

The warlords grinned, already anticipating blood.

"And from without," Durnakh continued, his eyes gleaming.

"We march upon the mountain itself."

He turned to his tacticians.

"Send word to our surface allies. The ones who hate Karad'Thul as much as we do."

The tactician bowed. "Aye, my King."

Durnakh's lips curled into a smile.

The assault would come from two sides.

From the dark tunnels beneath Karad'Thul, where his warriors would strike like a dagger in the night.

And from the outside, where an army of Duergar and mercenaries would besiege the city. They would not stop until the gates fell. Until the surface dwarves lay broken. Until Karad'Thul belonged to the deep once more.

As Durnakh watched his warriors prepare, he felt the voice again, coiling around his thoughts like smoke.

"You are no longer weak, Durnakh." "You are no longer forgotten." "You are a King."

And for the first time in months, he did not resist it. He let the whispers consume him. And he smiled.

Karad'Thul stood silent beneath the morning light, its towers reaching for the sky, its walls standing strong as they had for centuries.

The marketplaces bustled, merchants haggled, blacksmiths hammered steel, and guild banners fluttered in the crisp mountain air.

Dwarves went about their business, unaware that, beneath their very feet, the war had already begun.

Deep in the mine tunnels, where only shadows listened, Duergar warriors moved.

And outside the city, hidden among the jagged mountain passes, the second army gathered. This was no raid. This was a reckoning.

Beneath Karad'Thul, the mines stretched like a vast web, a network of forgotten tunnels, abandoned shafts, and hidden passages.

And in the darkest corners, the Duergar legions assembled. Silent killers, their armor blackened to absorb light. War mages, their hands glowing with dark fire. Siege engineers, preparing the great drills that would break through the dwarven defenses. Assassins, creeping along hidden paths, waiting for the order to strike.

At the front of the legion, standing upon an iron outcrop, King Durnakh the Bitter watched his army with cold satisfaction.

"Begin." The order spread like wildfire.

The Duergar surged forward, moving through the dark tunnels, approaching the heart of Karad'Thul from beneath.

The first strike was coming. The first blood spilled in darkness.

Duergar warriors crept through abandoned shafts, using forgotten pathways to ambush the dwarven miners and the few guards who were there. The first clash of steel rang out, a sharp cry echoing through the tunnels. A group of miners, caught unaware, fell in seconds—throats slit, their bodies left to bleed out upon the stone. The few who fought back were cut down.

One miner grabbed his pickaxe, swinging wildly, catching a Duergar in the face— Only to have his stomach run through by a black-bladed dagger. The Duergar spread like wildfire, slitting throats, stabbing chests, killing with cold efficiency. Blood ran down the mine shafts, soaking into the ancient stone.

Outside Karad'Thul, the mountains trembled. At dawn, the second Duergar army emerged, marching from hidden paths, from fortified caverns, their black banners waving against the morning light.

They brought war beasts— massive underground lizards armored in steel, their claws carving through the rocky pass. Mercenaries walked among them—oathbreakers, assassins, surface-dwelling traitors who had taken the Duergar's coin. At their lead was General Thuldar Ironvein, a grizzled Duergar warlord, his black armor heavy with rune-etched plates.

He raised his warhammer, his voice carrying across the army. "The surface dwarves stole our home! Today, we TAKE IT BACK!"

A thunderous roar echoed from the ranks. The army charged, a wave of dark steel and iron, surging toward Karad'Thul's outer defenses. Siege engines moved forward, massive drills prepared to bore into the gates. And behind them, the mages raised their hands, chanting— Summoning fire and shadow. The war had begun.The first sign of trouble came when the miners failed to report. Then came the shouting. Then the alarms.

Bell towers rang, warriors rushed to the walls, and the city watch ran to the mines, only to be greeted by darkness… and blood. "To arms! TO ARMS!" Guild warriors rushed from their barracks, grabbing axes and shields, ready to defend their city. The High Council gathered in haste, sending urgent messengers to King Thrain Stonehelm.

And in the midst of the chaos, one dwarf was already moving.

The bells rung out, their deep, thunderous toll shaking the halls.

I stood on the balcony of my quarters, my gut tightening as I watched the distant mountain pass. Then I saw them. The black tide of Duergar warriors, swarming toward the gates. My hands gripped the stone railing, my jaw clenched.

They were attacking. And they were coming to reclaim Karad'Thul.

I turned swiftly, grabbing my armor, strapping on my weapons. There was no time for hesitation. The city was under siege. And I would not let it fall.

The bells of Karad'Thul rang like thunder through the halls, their deep tolls echoing off stone and steel.

The dwarves of the city rushed to their posts, warriors donning armor, smiths pulling weapons from their forges, and the city watch locking down key gates and pathways.

At the great outer walls, captains barked orders as archers lined the ramparts, crossbows aimed at the approaching Duergar army.

The King's Guard stood ready, their shields gleaming in the morning light, their war banners unfurled, bearing the sigil of King Thrain Stonehelm.

But beneath the city, in the dark tunnels of the mines, the Duergar were already inside. The enemy had struck first. Now it was my turn.

I hurried to my armory, fastening my heavy dwarven breastplate, adjusting the leather straps of my steel pauldrons.

I pulled on my gauntlets, laced my thick boots, and strapped my warhammer to my back. Then came my helmet, its visor reinforced, marked with the sigil of the Warriors' Guild. At my belt hung my short sword, a second hammer, and three throwing axes. I was ready.

Borik and Umur were already waiting for me outside the Warriors' Guild, their faces grim and determined.

"The bastards came," Borik said, cracking his knuckles. "Let's send them back to the abyss."

Umur grinned, resting his hand on his blade. "Bout time we had a proper fight."

I nodded. "Let's go."

And together, we charged into the chaos. The streets were in turmoil. Civilians ran for shelter, guards ushered families into secured tunnels, and warriors rushed toward the outer defenses.

The first impact came like an earthquake.

BOOM.

The main gates shuddered as the Duergar's massive iron drills smashed against them. The siege had begun.

I arrived at the battlements with my men, staring down at the black mass of Duergar warriors below.

"ARCHERS!" the captain of the watch shouted. "LOOSE!"

A wave of bolts flew from the walls, raining death upon the enemy.

Some Duergar fell, their bodies pierced.

But the rest kept coming.

The siege engines rolled forward, fireball-casters loaded their runes, and the war chants of Duergar berserkers filled the mountains.

"SHIELDS UP!" someone yelled as the first wave of bolts from the enemy soared toward the walls.

I ducked, my shield absorbing an arrow meant for my face.

Then the gate shuddered again. The Duergar were breaking through. And if they did, the city would fall.

While the battle raged at the gates, another war was being fought below. The tunnels of Karad'Thul were compromised, and warriors rushed to seal the breach.

"WE NEED TO BLOCK THE TUNNELS!" a guild leader shouted.

"TO THE MINES!"

I saw the desperation in their faces.

If the enemy took the mines, they could strike the city from the inside.

"UMUR, BORIK—WITH ME!" I roared.

Leaving the battlements behind, we charged toward the lower tunnels.

We descended into the mines, our torches flickering, the air thick with dust.

And then we saw them.

The Duergar strike force was already inside, moving through the shafts like shadows, killing dwarves in their path.

Blood-stained pickaxes and mining carts lay scattered, their owners dead.

"There they are!" a Duergar captain snarled.

I raised my warhammer.

"CHARGE!"

The two forces collided.

I slammed my warhammer into a Duergar's chest, sending the warrior crashing into a minecart.

Umur cut down another, his blade carving through armor and flesh alike.

Borik, roaring like a mountain storm, swung his great axe, severing a Duergar's leg before splitting his skull.

"KEEP FIGHTING!" I shouted, blocking a blade with my shield before crushing the attacker's jaw with a hammer strike.

The tunnels were tight, brutal, with no room for retreat.

One of the guild warriors was pulled into the dark, his scream cut short by the sickening sound of steel piercing flesh.

But we fought on. This was our home. We would not let it fall.

The enemy numbers grew—more Duergar poured into the tunnels, reinforced by fresh troops.

"We can't hold!" one of my warriors shouted.

I clenched my jaw. Then I saw it—the support beams. The tunnel structure was unstable. If we could collapse the entrance, we could cut off the enemy reinforcements.

"BORIK! UMUR! COLLAPSE THE BEAMS!"

The warriors hacked at the wooden supports, the beams groaning under the strain. I held the line, fighting off the last wave of Duergar as the tunnel shook around us.

"NOW!"

With a final strike, the beams snapped, and the ceiling gave way. The Duergar screamed, their bodies buried beneath the collapsing rock. The dust settled, and the tunnel was sealed. For now.

I leaned against the wall, breathing heavily. My warriors were bloodied, wounded, but alive. We had stopped the breach. But above, the war still raged. We could still hear the battering rams, the cries of the dying, the clash of steel. And the city still needed us.

I pushed off the wall, gripping my warhammer. "Back to the gates," I said.

The others nodded, grim-faced. This war was far from over. And we were not done fighting.

The battering rams thundered against Karad'Thul's gates.

The walls shook under the force of siege drills.

Smoke and war cries filled the air, the sounds of battle echoing through the stone streets of the great dwarven city.

Karad'Thul was under siege.

And it was on the brink of falling.

Above, archers loosed volleys of steel-tipped bolts, cutting through the ranks of charging Duergar and their monstrous war beasts.

The great war banners of the mountain dwarves fluttered, stained in blood and soot, but they had not fallen yet.

In the tunnels below, my warriors and I had stalled the underground assault, but the Duergar above were relentless.

If Karad'Thul was to survive, we had to strike back.

Now.

We emerged from the tunnels, our armor splattered with dust and blood.

The city was in chaos.

The streets choked with wounded warriors, civilians rushing to safety, and King's Guard rallying the last of their strength at the main gates.

I spotted Commander Borik Battlehorn, one of the King's most trusted war captains, standing at the front lines.

Borik turned, his grizzled face covered in sweat and grime.

"Ironborn!" he barked. "Where in the **hells have you been? We're losing the walls!"

"We stopped the bastards from taking the mines," I replied, gripping my warhammer. "But they're not done yet."

Borik cursed under his breath.

"They’ve got siege towers up against the walls, the main gates are cracking, and they’re bringing in more mercenaries from the mountains."

I wiped blood from my brow. "Then we hit them first," I said.

Borik arched a brow. "You have a plan?"

I nodded.

"We take the fight to them. Counterattack before they breach the city."

Borik grinned. "I like how you think."

The counterattack would be fast, brutal, and precise. A squad of elite warriors would charge out of the gates before they fell, cutting through the frontline of Duergar siege crews.

Explosives from the alchemists would be used to set fire to the siege towers, denying them entry to the walls.

A hidden tunnel exit from the mines would be used to flank behind the Duergar formations, striking at their leaders.

If we could push the Duergar back, even for a short time, it would buy Karad’Thul enough time to reinforce the defenses.

It was a desperate plan. But it was the only chance we had.

The massive dwarven gates groaned, their hinges strained and near breaking.

Behind them, Borik, Umur, and I stood among a hundred battle-ready dwarves, prepared for the charge.

Borik raised his battle axe high, his voice carrying over the troops.

"WE ARE THE WALLS OF KARAD’THUL!"

The warriors stomped their boots against the stone, their shields slamming together in unison.

Borik turned to me. "You lead the charge."

I nodded. Then, with a final breath— The gates burst open. And we charged.

The Duergar frontlines barely had time to react before we slammed into them.

I swung my warhammer, caving in the skull of the first enemy I saw. Umur was a storm of steel, his blade carving through flesh, sending black-armored warriors sprawling. Borik hacked through a Duergar captain, his great axe splitting armor like timber.

The enemy ranks faltered, their momentum broken by the sheer force of our charge.

Then— The alchemists struck.

From the walls above, barrels of volatile fire oil were hurled onto the siege towers. Arrows ignited the oil, and within seconds—

Flames roared into the sky. The wooden towers became pyres, the Duergar warriors inside screaming as they burned. The siege weapons crumbled, their supports weakened, sending entire structures crashing into the ranks below. The black tide of enemy warriors wavered. Now was the time to end it.

I spotted the enemy warlord, General Thuldar Ironvein, barking orders amidst the chaos.

The Duergar were falling back, but if Thuldar rallied them, the siege would continue.

He had to die.

"WITH ME!" I shouted, pushing forward through the ranks.

Borik and a dozen warriors followed, cutting through the retreating Duergar, pushing toward Thuldar's command post.

The Duergar general saw us coming.

With a snarl, he drew his black-bladed greatsword and turned to meet us.

"I'LL HANG YOUR BONES FROM MY WALLS, IRONBORN!"

I roared back as our weapons clashed.

Thuldar was fast, brutal, and merciless. His greatsword swept low, aiming to take my legs out. I jumped back, narrowly dodging before countering with a hammer strike to the ribs. Thuldar grunted, but he did not falter.

We traded blows, our weapons clashing with raw power. Thuldar lunged, his sword slashing across my side, cutting through chainmail. I gritted my teeth, ignoring the pain. Then, when Thuldar raised his sword for a killing blow, I stepped in—fast, brutal, direct.

I slammed my warhammer into Thuldar's knee.

The Duergar bellowed in pain, staggering. I didn't hesitate. I brought my warhammer down one last time—

And shattered Thuldar's skull.

The Duergar warlord fell, lifeless. And with him, the enemy morale collapsed.

The remaining Duergar saw their leader fall. They wavered. Then, as if a shadow passed over them, they turned and fled.

The warriors of Karad'Thul cheered, their voices shaking the mountain itself.

I stood amidst the battlefield, breathing heavily, blood dripping from my armor.

Borik clapped me on the shoulder. "We held," he said. "We held, and we won."

I exhaled, looking toward the mountain pass where the enemy retreated. "Not yet," I muttered. "The Duergar aren't done."

Borik's face hardened. "Then we finish it."

The morning sun had risen over Karad'Thul, but its light did not bring peace.

The city's streets ran red, littered with the fallen, the air thick with the stench of blood, fire, and iron.

The Duergar had been repelled, their siege broken, but the cost was steep. Hundreds of dwarves lay dead, warriors and civilians alike.

The outer gates were in ruins, the wood and metal blasted apart by siege drills. Many homes had been burned, their structures reduced to charred husks. The mines still smoldered, the bodies of miners and invaders alike buried in collapsed tunnels.

But Karad'Thul still stood.

And the time for mourning would come later.

Now was the time for vengeance.

Within the King's Hall, the survivors of the battle assembled.

The High Council sat in their stone-carved seats, their faces grave, hardened.

King Thrain Stonehelm sat at the head of the room, his crown heavy upon his brow, his expression unreadable.

To his right, Queen Veldra Silverheart sat silent, her eyes glancing over reports of the wounded and the dead.

Before them stood Borik Steelward, the remaining captains of Karad'Thul's defenses, and me.

The room was somber, thick with unspoken anger.

Finally, the King spoke.

"The Duergar have broken our walls, killed our kin, and threatened our home."

His voice carried the weight of stone, his hands tightening into fists upon his throne.

"What say the council?"

The council erupted into discussion, some voices measured, others filled with fury.

"We cannot allow this attack to go unanswered!" Lord Dorin Flamebeard, head of the Blacksmith's Guild, slammed his fist on the table. "This was an act of war! The Duergar must pay in blood!"

"And what would that solve?" countered Eldrin Runeweave, a high-ranking scholar. "A full war with Dûm'Zarak could bring ruin to both our cities!"

Borik snorted. "They already brought ruin to us. We should march on them and break their gates as they tried to break ours."

"The mines are still compromised," another councilor added. "Even if we do not march to war, we must ensure the tunnels are sealed against another invasion."

All eyes turned to me. I had fought in both battles. I had seen the worst of it. And my voice would carry weight.

I took a step forward, my boots echoing on the stone floor. I looked at the King, then at the council.

"This attack was not just a battle. It was an attempt to wipe us from these halls."

The room was silent.

"We cannot allow this to happen again," I continued. "We should march upon the Duergar not for vengeance, but for survival."

"But full war could doom both our people," Eldrin Runeweave argued again.

My eyes darkened.

"This was no ordinary attack," I said. "King Durnakh the Bitter has been influenced by something far worse than hatred."

I hesitated for a moment before revealing the truth.

"The whispers of the Stone King's Crown have taken hold of him."

Gasps and murmurs filled the chamber. King Thrain's eyes narrowed. "Explain," he commanded.

I took a deep breath.

"When I ventured into the ancient ruins beneath the keep, the Stone King's Crown spoke of power, of legacy."

I clenched my fists.

"I resisted. But if Durnakh did not… then he may no longer be in control of himself."

The weight of my words settled over the room like an avalanche.

A cursed artifact. A mad king. An inevitable war. The council fell silent.

King Thrain exhaled, his face like carved granite.

"If Durnakh has fallen to madness… then there is only one path left to us."

The decision was made. Karad'Thul would not wait for the next attack. It would strike first.

Orders were given that scouts would be sent into the tunnels, mapping the best routes to Dûm'Zarak. Warriors would be gathered, supplies stocked, and siege weapons prepared. All tunnels leading into Karad'Thul would be reinforced, ensuring the city would not be left vulnerable.

Borik turned to me, his face a mix of determination and respect.

"Looks like we're going to war, Ironborn."

I adjusted my warhammer on my back.

"Aye," I muttered. "Looks like we are."

Word spread like wildfire. The Warriors' Guild was mobilized. The King's Guard trained in double shifts. The blacksmiths forged fresh weapons, hammering steel until their arms ached. The city was tense, filled with the heavy weight of an oncoming storm.

And soon… that storm would break upon Dûm'Zarak.

The call to war had been sounded.

The halls of Karad'Thul rumbled with the echoes of marching boots, the clang of steel being forged, and the deep, rhythmic chants of warriors preparing for battle.

It had been a week since the Duergar siege had been repelled.

Now, the time had come for vengeance.

And Karad'Thul would not march in silence.

In the great underground mustering halls, beneath the towering King's Keep, thousands of dwarves had gathered. The Warriors' Guild stood at the front lines, their armor reinforced, weapons freshly sharpened. The King's Guard, clad in gilded steel, stood at the flanks, their shields polished to gleaming bronze. The Ironbeards, an elite regiment of war veterans, stood behind them, their helmets marked with scars of past battles. The siege engineers prepared their tunneling machines, blasting powder, and iron drills, ready to break into Dûm'Zarak's fortifications. Beastmasters held their war boars on thick iron chains, the creatures snorting, armored for battle, their tusks tipped with steel.

The air was electric, thick with the scent of forge smoke, oiled steel, and the unspoken fury of a people wronged.

I stood beside Borik and Umur, my warhammer resting on my shoulder.

Across the sea of warriors, King Thrain Stonehelm stood upon a raised platform, his crown gleaming in the torchlight.

He raised his axe.

"We march today to reclaim our honor."

A roar erupted from the ranks.

"They thought they could break us!"

The dwarves slammed their weapons against their shields, the sound thundering through the halls.

"They thought they could take our city!"

"NEVER!" the warriors shouted in unison.

Thrain’s voice deepened, his eyes burning with the fire of a true dwarven king.

"Then we march. And we do not stop until the halls of Dûm’Zarak shake beneath our boots!"

A mighty war cry erupted, filling the great halls of Karad’Thul.

The war drums began.

And the march to war had begun.

The army pushed forward, marching through the deep roads, a vast network of ancient tunnels that wound through the mountains like veins.

Torches lined the walls, casting long shadows against iron-wrought banners and armored warriors. Every step took us deeper, closer to Dûm’Zarak’s gates. Scouts moved ahead, marking paths, ensuring no ambushes lay in wait.

Marching at the vanguard, I turned to Borik.

"We’ll be on their doorstep by sunrise," I said.

Borik grunted. "Then we make sure they regret ever leaving their holes."

Umur chuckled, resting his sword on his shoulder. "I’ve been waiting for this fight my whole life."

I glanced ahead, at the looming darkness of the deeper tunnels.

A war was coming. And it would be fought in the shadows.

As the army advanced, the deeper tunnels began to tighten, twisting like a labyrinth.

The faint sounds of dripping water echoed through the passages.

Then—

A low, sharp whistle cut through the air.

The scouts barely had time to react before crossbow bolts rained down from the walls.

"AMBUSH!"

From the darkness of side tunnels, Duergar raiders emerged, their black armor blending into the stone, their war cries piercing the air.

The battle erupted instantly.

I dove aside as a bolt clanged off my breastplate, rolling back onto my feet.

Duergar warriors charged from the shadows, their war picks gleaming with poison.

Borik met the first attacker, deflecting a heavy blow with his axe, then burying his own blade into the enemy's gut. Umur swung wide, his sword cutting through a Duergar's neck, sending a spray of black blood onto the stone floor.

The tunnel became a battlefield, bodies crashing against walls, steel clanging against steel.

I blocked a downward strike, twisting my hammer into an uppercut that shattered a Duergar's jaw.

More enemy reinforcements poured from the darkness.

"Hold the line!" I bellowed.

The dwarves pushed forward, hacking, smashing, crushing. The tunnel became a meat grinder.

The King's Guard surged ahead, their golden shields pushing back the ambushers.

One of the Duergar captains snarled, rallying his warriors.

"Break them! They will not reach our halls!"

I locked eyes with the captain. I did not hesitate.

With a grunt of effort, I hurled a throwing axe, the steel spinning through the air before burying itself in the captain's throat.

The Duergar collapsed, choking on blood. The enemy wavered.

And we pushed harder.

Minutes later, the last of the ambushers lay dead. The tunnels fell silent once more.

Borik spat on a fallen Duergar. "They know we're coming."

I wiped my warhammer clean. "Let them. It won't save them."

After the battle, we regrouped, pressing forward once more.

Hours passed, the tunnels growing colder, darker, more oppressive.

Then— The passage opened into a massive cavern. And there it was. Dûm'Zarak.

The fortress-city of the Duergar, its black stone walls stretching high, its towers bristling with spikes, siege weapons, and burning braziers.

The gates loomed before us, reinforced with rune-carved iron, standing as an unyielding bastion of the deep.

On the walls, Duergar warriors stood ready, their red eyes glaring down at our approaching army.

And at the highest tower, overlooking them all, stood King Durnakh the Bitter.

Even from here, I could almost hear the whispers.

Durnakh raised his sword, his voice booming like thunder.

"YOU COME TO DIE, SURFACE FILTH."

King Thrain stepped forward, his axe raised high.

"DÛM'ZARAK WILL FALL THIS DAY!"

The war cries of thousands of dwarves erupted as the siege began.

The assault on Dûm'Zarak had begun.

The air in the cavern of Dûm'Zarak vibrated with the pounding of war drums.

The echoes of marching boots, the clanking of steel on steel, and the bellowing war cries of thousands of dwarves filled the vast underground battlefield.

Torches and braziers burned bright, illuminating the black stone walls of the Duergar city, their towers looming like jagged fangs in the darkness.

At the gates, rows of Duergar warriors stood ready, their shields locked, their eyes burning red like embers in the abyss.

Above, siege weapons groaned, prepared to unleash death upon us.

And at the front of the Karad'Thul army, standing tall with his royal axe gleaming in the firelight, was King Thrain Stonehelm.

The Stone King's Crown sat atop his brow, and though he said nothing of it, I could feel its presence. And from this distance, it spoke in the dark.

King Thrain raised his axe high.

"FOR KARAD'THUL! FOR THE MOUNTAIN!"

The dwarves surged forward, their battle cries shaking the cavern.

I ran at the frontline, my warhammer gripped tight, my boots pounding against the stone.

The first wave of arrows and bolts rained down from the walls.

"SHIELDS UP!" Borik bellowed.

The front ranks lifted their heavy steel shields, deflecting the barrage, though some dwarves fell, pierced through gaps in their armor.

Then came the counterfire.

Ballistae on Karad'Thul's siege carts fired, launching great iron-tipped spears that ripped into the Duergar defenses, tearing through wood and stone, sending enemy archers screaming from the walls.

"RAMS FORWARD!"

From the rear ranks, siege crews pushed massive iron-tipped battering rams, their mechanisms reinforced with rune-etched steel.

If Karad'Thul was to take Dûm'Zarak, its gates had to fall.

The Duergar stood firm, waiting for the charge to close the distance.

Then, with thundering orders, their counterattack began.

Boiling black oil was poured from the battlements, cascading onto the attackers.

Stone-tipped ballistae fired, impaling some dwarves mid-run.

Warlocks chanted from the towers, summoning dark waves of fire, sending bursts of magical flame into the Karad'Thul ranks.

The battlefield lit up in chaos.

Dwarves screamed as fire engulfed them, their bodies burning as they charged forward regardless.

One of the battering rams was crushed, its wooden beams snapping under magical force.

But the others kept pushing.

Through the storm of flaming arrows, poison bolts, and falling rubble, the first wave of warriors reached the walls.

And the real battle began.

The battering rams slammed into the gate.

BOOM.

The walls trembled, but did not break.

The Karad'Thul warriors fought beneath the looming battlements, clashing with Duergar sentries who poured from side tunnels to stop their advance.

I swung my warhammer, crushing the helm of a Duergar captain, sending him collapsing to the stone floor.

Umur cut a path forward, his sword carving through armor and flesh alike.

Gorik roared, swinging his great axe, taking down two enemies in a single swing.

"MORE FORCE ON THE GATE!"

A second ram crew charged in, reinforcing the first.

Another mighty crash against the iron doors. Cracks formed along the hinges. The gates were breaking. Then the Duergar unleashed their greatest weapon.

From behind the walls, the massive inner gates opened, revealing a monstrous war beast.

A Chthonic Wurm, its flesh stone-gray, its eyes glowing with unnatural hunger.

It emerged from the darkness, its massive maw lined with serrated fangs, its undulating form moving with terrifying speed.

The Duergar had kept it hidden for war.

And now, they had released it upon the battlefield.

I saw it before anyone else. "SCATTER!" I bellowed.

The beast lunged.

It crashed into the front lines, crushing warriors beneath its bulk, snapping its jaws down on three dwarves in a single bite.

Blood sprayed, and screams filled the cavern.

The Karad'Thul line buckled. For the first time in the battle, we stepped back. And the Duergar pushed forward. I charged. "BRING IT DOWN!"

Borik and Umur followed, along with a dozen warriors. We dodged its lashing tail, narrowly avoiding getting crushed beneath its coils. I rolled aside as the maw snapped toward me, the hot breath of the beast reeking of death.

The Duergar cheered, seeing their monster turn the tide of battle.

Until we fought back. Borik hacked into its side, his axe sinking deep, black ichor spraying from the wound. Umur leaped onto its back, driving his sword into the spine, twisting it as the creature let out a horrifying screech. But it wasn't enough.

The Wurm reared up, throwing Umur off its back, sending him crashing into a pile of broken shields.

I saw my opening. With a roar, I lifted my warhammer. And as the beast lunged for me, I swung with all my strength. The hammer crashed against its skull, shattering bone, sending the beast into a violent death spasm. Its massive body twisted, collapsing in a heap, its lifeless eyes still glowing faintly.

The battlefield fell silent for a breath.

Then— A mighty roar of victory erupted from the Karad'Thul warriors. The Duergar momentum faltered. The tide had shifted. At the same moment, the battering rams struck again.

The iron hinges gave way. A thunderous crash. The gates of Dûm'Zarak shattered. Smoke billowed from within. And behind the now-broken walls, the city's defenders stood waiting. This was no longer a siege. This was a city battle. And the real fight for Dûm'Zarak had only begun. The iron gates of Dûm'Zarak lay shattered, twisted wreckage strewn across the stone streets.

Smoke curled into the cavern's high ceiling, the acrid scent of burning oil, flesh, and steel thick in the air.

The Karad'Thul army surged forward, pouring into the city like a flood of steel and vengeance.

For the first time in centuries, surface dwarves stood inside the heart of the Duergar capital.

And they came for war.

The streets were narrow, winding paths lined with fortified blackstone buildings, the architecture jagged, cruel, and harshly carved.

The Duergar had prepared for this. They had barricades, they had traps, and most of all—

They had no intention of surrendering.

"SHIELDS UP!" Borik bellowed.

Just as we entered the streets, crossbow fire rained down from the rooftops, cutting through the first ranks.

Screams pierced the air, warriors toppling as bolts tore through armor.

Then came the counterattack.

Duergar warriors poured from side alleys, ambushing our advancing forces.

The streets erupted into a vicious, brutal melee.

I caught a Duergar blade on my shield, twisting to bring my warhammer into the enemy's ribs.

The crack of bone was drowned out by the chaos of war.

Umur blocked a spear thrust, pivoted, and ran his sword through the attacker's neck.

Borik, roaring like a mountain storm, used his battleaxe like a reaper's scythe, felling three Duergar in brutal succession.

The streets became a maze of bloodshed.

Every alley, every corner, every rooftop held hidden dangers.

Duergar warlocks unleashed shadow magic, their spells draining the very strength from Karad'Thul warriors.

Dwarven shield walls pressed forward, breaking through barricades under a hail of boiling oil and firebombs.

Every building became a fortress.

Every street became a battleground.

The deeper we pushed, the more dangerous it became.

Duergar demolition crews collapsed tunnels, separating squads of Karad'Thul warriors from their main force.

Hidden pit traps claimed many unwary dwarves, sending them plummeting into spike-lined pits below.

Fires spread, the blackstone streets lit in burning orange, choking the tunnels with smoke.

This was not just a city under attack.

This was a city that had been turned into a weapon.

And the deeper we fought, the more we bled.

King Thrain, standing atop the broken gates, surveyed the battlefield.

"We must take the central keep!" he bellowed.

"If we cut off the head, the body will fall!"

But to reach it, we had to push through the Grand Bazaar, the massive trade district of Dûm'Zarak, now converted into a fortress of death.

And at its heart, waiting for us, stood the Elite Guard of King Durnakh.

The hardest fight was still ahead.

I wiped blood from my visor, adjusting my grip on my hammer.

"This isn't over," I muttered.

Borik spat blood. "Then let's finish it."

And the warriors of Karad'Thul pressed forward, deeper into the burning city.

The streets behind us were soaked in blood, the alleys piled with the bodies of Duergar and Karad'Thul warriors alike.

Yet, the city was not yet won.

Before us stood the Grand Bazaar, the once-thriving market district of Dûm'Zarak, now a fortified war zone.

Stalls that once sold jewels, enchanted weapons, and exotic ores had been turned into barricades, sharpened and spiked.

The great stone archways that led into the market had been reinforced with Duergar steel, and murder holes lined the upper terraces.

At the center of the Grand Bazaar, a massive statue of the first Duergar king loomed, its eyes glowing with dark energy, enchanted to watch over the battlefield.

And beyond the fortifications, at the far end of the plaza, stood the final gate to the keep of King Durnakh.

The Karad'Thul army had fought hard to reach this place.

Now, we had to fight harder to survive it.

From the shadowed terraces above, hundreds of Duergar stood ready.

Crossbowmen lined the rooftops, their bolts already nocked.

Warlocks chanted behind stone barricades, their hands glowing with dark magic.

Shielded phalanxes formed a wall of blackened iron, their spears bristling like a porcupine's back.

Siege weapons had been mounted on the market rooftops, modified ballistae with explosive-tipped bolts.

And at the head of the defense, clad in blackened steel, stood the Elite Guard of Dûm'Zarak —the best warriors of the Duergar kingdom, each one a master of war.

They were waiting for the attack.

And they were ready.

King Thrain stepped forward, his royal axe dripping with Duergar blood.

"We take the Grand Bazaar, or we die at its gates!"

The dwarves roared in response, slamming their weapons against their shields.

I stood beside Borik and Umur, our weapons tight in our grips.

This was it.

The bloodiest battle of the war was about to begin.

And no one was walking away unscathed.

"CHARGE!"

The Karad'Thul warriors surged forward, their boots pounding against the stone as they rushed into the marketplace.

Immediately, the sky turned black with a hail of crossbow bolts and firebombs.

Dwarves fell mid-stride, bolts punching through armor, piercing necks, eyes, and hearts.

Explosive bolts struck the ranks, sending warriors flying, their bodies torn apart.

Dark magic surged from the warlocks, bursts of shadow flame engulfing Karad'Thul warriors, reducing them to smoldering husks.

The first wave was slaughtered.

But the second pushed forward.

And then the third.

And soon—

The two forces clashed.

Steel met steel, shields smashed into shields, and the streets became rivers of blood.

The battle raged in every direction.

Dwarves ducked behind overturned carts, using them as cover against raining arrows.

Warriors smashed through wooden stalls, crushing enemies with debris.

The Duergar Elite Guard fought like demons, wielding war picks and jagged swords with brutal efficiency.

I locked blades with one of them, a massive Duergar with a twin-bladed axe.

The enemy swung down hard, forcing me to roll aside, the axe smashing into the stone floor, sending sparks flying.

Before the Duergar could recover, I slammed my warhammer into his ribs, the crack of breaking bone echoing over the battlefield.

But another took his place.

They just kept coming.

Above the battle, the warlocks completed their dark incantations.

A thick mist of shadow spread across the bazaar, turning the air cold, heavy.

Suddenly—

Karad'Thul warriors screamed.

The mist clung to them, seeping into their armor, causing pain beyond flesh—draining their very life essence.

I gasped, feeling the energy being pulled from my body. The Duergar had magic. And they were using it to turn the tide.

Borik stumbled back, clutching his chest, his skin pale from the life-draining mist.

"We have to take out those warlocks!" I shouted, gritting my teeth against the pain.

"But they're on the rooftops!" Umur gasped, fighting off a Duergar warrior.

My mind raced. Then I saw it.

The massive statue of the first Duergar king, looming over the marketplace.

Its base connected to the upper terraces, where the warlocks stood chanting.

If we could bring it down…

I nodded to Borik and Umur. "We collapse the statue," I said.

Borik's eyes widened. "You mad bastard."

"Yeah," I grunted, gripping my warhammer. "Let's go."

We pushed through the battlefield, fighting our way to the statue.

Duergar warriors tried to stop us, but they were outnumbered and outmatched.

We reached the base of the statue, where thick support beams held the massive structure in place.

Borik and Umur hacked at the supports, their axes cleaving into stone and metal.

The ground trembled.

The statue began to crack.

Above, the warlocks sensed the danger—and they panicked.

"STOP THEM!" one shrieked, directing crossbowmen toward us.

I shielded Umur as bolts rained down, several embedding into my armor.

Then—

With a final mighty swing, the last support beam gave way.

The statue groaned, shifted—

Then began to fall.

Straight toward the warlocks.

The massive stone statue crashed into the terraces, crushing the warlocks beneath it, sending crumbling debris and corpses raining down onto the battlefield.

The dark mist dissipated, the magic broken. The Karad'Thul warriors felt their strength return. And with a final war cry, we surged forward. The Duergar lines buckled. The Elite Guard fell one by one. The remaining defenders retreated toward the keep. The Grand Bazaar had fallen. And now, only one battle remained. The battle for King Durnakh's throne.

The Grand Bazaar lay in ruins, its streets soaked in blood and fire, the bodies of Duergar warriors and Karad'Thul dwarves alike littering the shattered market square. The warlocks were dead. The enemy's defenses had collapsed. Now, only one path remained. The massive stone bridge that led to the Keep of Dûm'Zarak, the heart of the Duergar kingdom, where King Durnakh the Bitter waited.

The keep loomed before us—a black fortress of jagged stone and iron, its massive doors etched with runes of defiance.

Torches burned upon its outer towers, casting long, ominous shadows.

From the high battlements, red-eyed Duergar marksmen took aim, their crossbows trained on the Karad'Thul army.

At the center of the keep's gatehouse stood a final formation of elite warriors—Durnakh's Royal Guard, battle-hardened killers, their shields locked, their spears ready.

Behind them, inside the keep, the throne room awaited.

And at its heart sat King Durnakh.

The war was nearly over.

King Thrain Stonehelm stood at the front of the Karad'Thul forces, his royal axe resting against his shoulder.

He surveyed the battlefield, then turned to Borik, Umur, and me.

"This is it," he said. "No retreat, no hesitation. We take that keep, or we die at its gates."

Borik grunted, gripping his axe tighter.

"Aye. Let's be done with this."

I nodded, my warhammer feeling heavier than usual.

The Stone King's Crown sat upon Thrain's brow, gleaming with an eerie glow.

For a moment, I could swear I heard whispers.

But there was no time for that now.

Thrain raised his axe high.

"FOR KARAD'THUL! FOR THE MOUNTAIN!"

The dwarves roared, their voices shaking the cavern.

And the final charge began.

The bridge leading to the keep was narrow, flanked by bottomless chasms, where the lava veins of the deep burned far below.

The Duergar crossbows fired first.

Bolts rained down, punching through shields, piercing armor and flesh.

Warriors toppled into the abyss, their screams lost in the darkness below.

The first charge wavered under the hail of death.

Then the Karad'Thul siege engineers answered.

They unleashed their own volleys—rune-etched spears fired from ballistae, smashing into the keep's towers, sending Duergar snipers plummeting to their deaths.

Borik, leading the vanguard, slammed into the Royal Guard like an avalanche.

The bridge turned into a killing ground.

The Duergar fought like demons, their shields and spears forming an unbreakable wall.

I swung my warhammer, crushing an enemy's chest, sending blood spraying onto the stone.

Umur carved through another, his blade splitting flesh and bone.

The clash of steel, the roar of dying warriors, the stench of burnt flesh and blood filled the cavern.

The battle for the Keep of Dûm'Zarak had begun.

The Royal Guard held firm.

The Karad'Thul warriors crashed against them, but they did not break.

Then—

The battering ram arrived.

A team of dwarven siege breakers charged forward, carrying a massive iron-headed ram, its surface glowing with runes of force.

"CLEAR THE WAY!"

We pulled back as the ram smashed into the gates. The first strike sent cracks through the ancient black iron. The second strike made the hinges groan. The third strike— The gates exploded inward, sending flaming debris across the keep's entrance.

The Royal Guard, now exposed, fell back. And the dwarves surged forward. The Keep of Dûm'Zarak had been breached. The halls of Dûm'Zarak were a labyrinth of carved obsidian corridors, lined with burning braziers and war banners of the Duergar kingdom.

The Karad'Thul warriors pushed deeper, hacking through the last of the Duergar resistance. Blood painted the walls, bodies piled at every turn.

Then, as we approached the great doors of the throne room, the Duergar warriors stopped fighting. They pulled back, their faces unreadable. The doors of the throne room creaked open. And at the far end of the chamber, upon his twisted iron throne, sat King Durnakh the Bitter.

His armor gleamed black, engraved with ancient runes of dominance and war. His yellowed eyes burned with hatred. And at his feet lay a pool of spilled wine, as if he had been drinking while waiting for us. He smiled—a cruel, mocking grin. "So." His voice echoed through the vast chamber. "The surface filth has finally arrived."

Borik stepped forward, his axe dripping with Duergar blood.

"Your war is lost, Durnakh."

Durnakh tilted his head.

"Lost?" he repeated, almost amused. "You truly believe that?"

The Duergar king slowly stood, rolling his shoulders, his massive greatsword resting at his side. "Then come. Prove your victory."

He raised his blade, pointing it toward us. "Let us end this."

The doors behind us slammed shut. The final battle had begun. The great iron doors of the throne room slammed shut, sealing the warriors of Karad'Thul inside. The air was thick with the scent of burning braziers and spilled wine, the torches casting long, flickering shadows across the obsidian-carved walls. At the far end of the chamber, seated upon his black iron throne, sat King Durnakh the Bitter—a monarch twisted by hate, battle-worn, yet still defiant.

He stood slowly, rolling his broad shoulders, the engraved black plate armor shifting with him.

His greatsword rested against the floor, its rune-etched blade humming with dark power. His yellowed eyes met mine. And he smiled. "You've come all this way, Ironborn."

Durnakh's voice was deep, cruel, yet almost amused. "So be it. Let's end this."

The room was silent. The Karad'Thul warriors stood at the edges of the chamber, watching. Even Borik and Umur did not step forward.

The war would not end until one of us was dead.

I tightened my grip on my warhammer, feeling the rough leather bite into my calloused fingers. I rolled my neck, exhaling slowly. Then I stepped forward. Durnakh moved first.

The massive Duergar king surged forward, swinging his greatsword in a brutal arc, the runes upon the blade flaring to life.

I dodged sideways, the strike slamming into the floor, shattering the obsidian stone beneath us.

Durnakh's strength was monstrous.

He followed up instantly, bringing the greatsword back around, forcing me to raise my shield.

The impact sent me skidding backward, my boots scraping against the bloodstained stone.

I barely had time to recover before Durnakh lunged again.

I ducked, rolling to the left, my warhammer swinging toward the king's knee.

Durnakh twisted, blocking with the flat of his sword, then drove a knee into my ribs.

Pain exploded through my side, the force knocking me backward.

The Duergar king grinned. "You're slowing down, Ironborn."

I coughed, my vision blurring for a moment. But then I grinned back. "And you're getting old, Durnakh."

The king's smile vanished. And the real fight began. The throne room became a whirlwind of steel and stone. Durnakh fought like a storm, his massive blade carving through the air, each swing capable of cleaving a man in half. But I was faster.

I ducked, weaved, countered, using my smaller size to my advantage. Durnakh's sword slashed wide—I slammed my warhammer into his ribs. The king staggered but countered with a brutal pommel strike—I barely dodged, rolling to the side.

I swung low at Durnakh's legs— The king leaped back, bringing his sword down in a vertical strike. The floor split from the impact, cracks spreading through the black stone. Durnakh was stronger. But I was smarter. And I saw my opening.

Durnakh lunged forward, bringing his sword in a horizontal arc, his full weight behind the swing. I stepped in instead of away. I raised my shield, catching the blade at an angle, redirecting its momentum. Durnakh stumbled forward. And I struck. My warhammer crashed into the Duergar king's left knee, shattering bone.

Durnakh roared in agony, collapsing onto one knee. I didn't hesitate. I swung again— This time, the hammer collided with Durnakh's ribs, crushing armor, breaking ribs, sending the king gasping to the floor. The greatsword slipped from his grasp. The fight was over. But Durnakh was not dead yet.

I pressed my warhammer against Durnakh's chest. The Duergar king coughed, blood dripping from his lips. His eyes burned with hatred, yet beneath it—there was something else. Resignation.

"You think this ends with me, Ironborn?" Durnakh rasped.

I said nothing.

Durnakh's bloodied lips curled into a grin.

"I was never the real enemy."

I narrowed my eyes. "What are you talking about?"

Durnakh coughed, chuckling weakly.

"The whispers, Ironborn. You hear them too, don't you?"

My blood turned cold.

Durnakh's gaze shifted.

Not at me— But at King Thrain. Where the Stone King's Crown sat. And suddenly, I understood. This war had never been about Durnakh's ambition. It had always been about the crown. It had whispered to Durnakh—as it whispered to Thrain now. This was never a battle of kings. This was a battle of who would wear the crown next. And now, Thrain wore it.

I tightened my grip on my hammer. Then I raised it high. Durnakh closed his eyes, smiling. The war had ended. But a new battle had just begun.

I brought the hammer down And King Durnakh breathed his last. The throne room of Dûm'Zarak had fallen into silence. The great Duergar king lay slain, his lifeblood pooling across the cracked obsidian floor.

The war was over. And yet— Something felt wrong. I stood over the corpse of Durnakh, my warhammer dripping with blood, my breaths coming hard and heavy.

The battle had ended.

From across the chamber, King Thrain Stonehelm stood tall, his royal axe planted against the ground.

And upon his head, resting like a shadow of the past, sat the Stone King's Crown.

The crown that had once whispered to Durnakh.

I turned toward Thrain, my grip tightening on my hammer.

"Take it off."

Thrain’s gaze snapped toward me. "What?"

I stepped forward, ignoring the bodies of the fallen warriors around us. "The crown, Thrain. Take it off."

Thrain’s brow furrowed, his grizzled face twisting in confusion. "You just won me a war, Ironborn, and now you give me orders?"

The words were his. But the tone was not. It was too sharp, too commanding, too possessive. And the whispers in the air—they were growing louder. I felt it.

The same thing Durnakh had felt—the voice of something ancient, something hungry.

It coiled around the chamber like a ghostly presence, whispering in a tongue older than mountains.

I wasn’t the only one who noticed.

Borik shifted uneasily, his fingers clenching around his axe.

Umur’s eyes darted between Thrain and me, sensing the change in the air.

The other dwarves remained silent, watching, waiting.

I took another step forward. "It’s speaking to you, isn’t it?"

Thrain stiffened. His fingers curled around the armrest of the throne, his knuckles white from the grip. "I don’t know what you mean."

But the way his shoulders tensed, the way his gaze flickered for half a second— He knew. And so did I.

The Stone King’s Crown was never just a relic. It was a weapon. Not of steel. Not of magic. But of whispers, ideas.

For centuries, it had been worn by rulers, each one growing more ruthless, more power-hungry, more consumed by its silent commands.

It had whispered to Durnakh.

It had driven him to war.

And now, it whispered to Thrain.

Thrain rose slowly from the throne, the weight of the crown upon his brow. His eyes met mine—hard, unyielding. "You think I am weak?"

I pressed my lips into a tight line. "I think you're wearing something you don't understand."

Thrain exhaled sharply, shaking his head. "I've ruled Karad'Thul for forty years, Ironborn. I do not bend to whispers."

I frowned. "Then take it off."

The room fell silent. Borik and Umur tensed, hands drifting to their weapons. The Karad'Thul warriors shifted uncomfortably, sensing the tension. Thrain's jaw clenched. And he did not remove the crown. The whispers grew stronger, curling around the chamber like smoke. I saw it now—Thrain's breathing had changed. It was shallower, controlled, as if he were fighting something unseen.

"Thrain."

No response.

His fingers twitched, his eyes darkened, his expression hardened. And then— "Karad'Thul is strong. But it must be stronger."

The voice was his. But the words were not. My chest tightened. It was happening. The crown was working on him, bending him, shaping him— Just as it had done to Durnakh.

And if I did not stop it— Another war would begin. I exhaled, lowering my hammer slightly. I had a choice.

One that would change the fate of Karad'Thul forever. Try to convince Thrain to remove the crown. Challenge him for it. Kill him now and destroy the crown forever. My mind raced. My heart pounded.

And as Thrain turned toward me, his eyes shadowed in something ancient, something not his own— I knew. I had already made my choice.

The air inside the throne room of Dûm'Zarak had grown thick, heavy. Not with smoke. Not with blood. But with a silence more dangerous than steel.

King Thrain Stonehelm stood atop the Duergar throne, his broad form illuminated by the flickering braziers.

And upon his head, the Stone King's Crown sat like a weight of iron and shadow. The battle was over. The war had been won. But the real fight was only beginning. I could see it now—clear as day. Thrain was changing. He was still himself… for now. But the whispers were gnawing at him, digging their claws into his mind.

And if I did not act, I would watch my king become the very thing we had fought to destroy. I stepped forward, my warhammer still in hand, but lowered. "Thrain."

My voice was firm, but not aggressive. The King snapped his gaze toward me. For a moment, his expression was unreadable.

Then— "What is it, Ironborn?"

His tone was measured, but there was an edge to it now—subtle, sharp, commanding. I tightened my jaw.

"You need to take the crown off." The words hung in the air, cold and final.

The soldiers standing at the edges of the room shifted, sensing the tension. Borik and Umur exchanged uneasy glances, hands drifting toward their weapons. Thrain's face twisted into something unreadable.

Then he chuckled. "Take it off?" He shook his head. "You think I am some feeble-willed fool, Ironborn? That I am like Durnakh?"

"I think you're wearing something you don't understand."

I remembered.

The first whispers of the crown, the way it spoke to me in the depths of the ruins.

"Will you take the burden of kings?"

"Will you carry it, knowing it will shape you into something you do not recognize?"

"If you place the crown upon your head, you will know it all. The good… and the terrible."

The words echoed in my mind, cold and relentless.

I kept my voice flat, steady.

Thrain's lips pressed into a tight line. "I understand more than you know."

His fingers curled against the throne's armrests. The whispering in the air grew stronger. The tension in the throne room of Dûm'Zarak was like a drawn bowstring—tight, ready to snap. King Thrain Stonehelm stood before me, the Stone King's Crown still resting upon his brow. But I could see it now—the change, the shadow lurking behind his eyes.

This was not my king anymore. This was something else. Something hungry. Something that whispered in the dark.

Thrain raised his axe. "If you raise your hammer against me, Ironborn—if you defy me—then you are a traitor to your king."

His voice was deep, commanding. But I didn't hear Thrain anymore. I heard the crown. I tightened my grip on my hammer. "I'm not defying my king."

I exhaled. "I'm saving him." And I swung. My hammer struck true.

A heavy, bone-rattling impact against Thrain's head—not to kill him, but to break the crown's hold.

The force sent him staggering back, his axe clattering against the stone floor.

For the briefest second, his eyes widened in shock.

Then— The crown slipped from his head. It fell to the floor, rolling once, twice— And then landed at my feet. The whispers stopped. The weight in the air lifted, just slightly.

I looked down at the thing of iron and ancient gold, pulsing with a power that was never meant for mortal hands.

And I knew what I had to do.

I bent down, picked up the Stone King's Crown, and turned away from Thrain.

The room was silent as I walked past Borik, past Umur, past the Karad'Thul warriors who had fought beside me.

They watched, unblinking, saying nothing. They knew. They understood. No one stopped me.

I stepped through the great ruined gates of the keep, into the wider cavern of Dûm'Zarak, where the final battle had been fought.

The bridge stood ahead—

That narrow bridge, flanked by bottomless chasms, where the lava veins of the deep burned far below.

Where so many had fallen into the abyss. Where this thing belonged. I stood at the edge, looking down into the endless blackness beneath. The crown felt heavy in my hands, as if it knew what was coming. As if it feared it.

The whispers tried again, crawling at the edges of my thoughts.

You will be a king. I clenched my jaw. "No." You will rule the mountains. The surface. The world. I exhaled. "No."

You could have everything. I tightened my grip. "You are nothing."

And with that, I hurled the cursed thing into the abyss. The crown tumbled, end over end, descending into the depths of the world. The whispers faded, growing weaker—until they were gone. Then, a moment later— A deep, unnatural howl echoed from the chasm below, something ancient screaming in its final death throes.

Then silence. The crown was gone. And with it, the war was truly over. I turned back toward the keep.

King Thrain was still on one knee, rubbing his temple, his breath coming hard and fast. His eyes were clearer now. He looked up at me, confusion flickering over his face. "What… happened?"

Borik stepped forward, kneeling at his king's side. "You were gone, Thrain." His voice was low, steady. "But Ironborn brought you back."

Thrain's gaze shifted to me. I met his eyes. For the first time in what felt like ages— It was him again. Not the whispers. Not the crown. Just Thrain Stonehelm. The man I had sworn to follow. The man I had saved.

He nodded. "Thank you, old friend." I let out a slow breath. "Let's go home."

The army gathered what they could, taking stock of the fallen, the wounded, and the ruins of war.

The dead were honored, their bodies carried back to Karad'Thul for proper burial.

The Duergar survivors—those who surrendered—were allowed to flee into the deep, their war lost. No more blood needed to be spilled. No more crowns needed to be worn.

And so, we marched home. Back to Karad'Thul. Back to the mountains that we called our own. The war was over. And the rebuilding started.

The war had ended, but the true work had only just begun.

Karad'Thul had suffered deep wounds, its outer walls shattered, its mines scarred by battle, its streets blackened by fire.

For an entire year, we labored, rebuilding what had been lost.

The great walls were reforged, stone by stone, reinforced with steel and dwarven rune-work.

The outer gates, once blasted open by Duergar siege weapons, were now stronger than ever, carved from mountain rock, lined with black iron, sealed with ancient protective runes.

The mines were reinforced, their tunnels secured, their foundations made unshakable.

The King's Hall, where the High Council sat, was restored to its former glory, the banners of Karad'Thul hanging high once more.

And above all, we placed guards at the entrance to Dûm'Zarak, ensuring that whatever remained in the deep—the last remnants of the Duergar, their whispered shadows, their lost kin—would never rise again.

For a full year, the hammer and chisel never ceased. And I was never still. I worked, I built, I led, directing the masons, guiding the smiths, rebuilding the foundations of a home that would last a thousand lifetimes.

This was what I had always done. This was who I was. It was time to go home.

A child had been born during that year. My son. My legacy. His mother, Isolde, had stayed in Karad'Thul as the city healed, watching from the halls of nobility. With Karad'Thul strong once more, with the war behind us, I made my choice. One of peace.

And so, we left the city, riding down the mountain road, past the orchards and fields, past the flowing rivers, back to the place where I belonged.

Back to my cottage.

The cottage stood as I had left it—a simple thing, but strong, well-built, made with my own hands. The fields stretched wide and golden, waiting to be plowed, waiting to bring forth life. Each morning, I rose with the dawn, taking my plow, working the fields as the sun climbed high over the mountains. As the stars lit the sky, as the world grew quiet, I smoked my pipe, watching the fields sway in the wind, feeling the warmth of the hearth at my back.